

# THE VOW

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PAUL TRENT

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Gerald A. Skinner.







## **THE VOW**









"GIVE HER BACK TO ME—AND I VOW THE REST OF MY  
DAYS TO YOUR SERVICE"—Page 21

# THE VOW

*A NOVEL*

BY  
PAUL TRENT

AUTHOR OF  
A WIFE BY PURCHASE

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR BY  
JOHN RAE

*FIFTH EDITION*



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*February, 1911*



TO  
ETHEL

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## THE VOW





# THE VOW

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## CHAPTER I

**I**T was a dull November day, and the flickering light from the log fire lighted up one side of John Gaunt's face — a strong face, with great possibilities in it for good or evil. The eyes were keen and steady; the nose commanding, while the lips were rather full, and would have denoted a nature that might run riot had it not been for the firmly moulded chin.

His wealth had been gathered by the use of his brains, and in that fact he took an intense pride. But one thing had been missing from his life — a friend. Acquaintances his check-book had brought, and he possessed the usual parasites that crowd the path of the millionaire. Life had been too strenuous to allow him to realize that he was losing a good deal of its sweetness, but latterly he had been conscious of a fierce longing to find some one who might become a second self — some one in whom he could confide, and whom he could trust with his inmost thoughts. And he imagined that he had found such a one in Lady Mildred Blythe.

A footman entered and approached with that deprecating air of the well-trained servant.

"Mr. Braithwaite would like to see you, sir."

Gaunt hesitated, but soon a grim look came to his face.

"I will see him."

A few moments later a gentleman, who was evidently ill at ease, came in and approached Gaunt with a deprecating air.

"They told me in the City that I should find you here," he remarked apologetically.

"Then they failed in their duty. What do you want?" Gaunt asked curtly.

"You've been a good friend to me, and I'm afraid that I've worried you; but it is not my fault, old chap. I'm desperately hard up — and ——"

"Cut it short. I suppose that you want to borrow again?"

"I thought that you would ——"

"In this instance you thought correctly. I owe you a debt, for you did me a service many years ago. On several occasions since I have endeavored to repay it. Now, I will give you a check for a hundred pounds."

Braithwaite began effusively to express his thanks but was cut short abruptly.

"This is the last time — and I am a man of my word. It seems to me that you must be a shiftless kind of person not to get on, with all the chances you have had. But I won't preach. I want you to understand that I won't give you another penny piece — not if you are starving," Gaunt said with quiet emphasis.

Braithwaite watched his every movement, and when the check had been signed, almost clutched at the slip of paper.



"I am very grateful — and ——"

"That's sufficient. Now you can go," Gaunt intervened, and gave him a curt nod of dismissal.

Braithwaite slouched away, and there was a little more color in his pale cheeks, perhaps brought there by shame; perhaps by that feeling of exultation which the sudden acquirement of money gives to the needy.

Gaunt fell into a reverie, and his thoughts were with the past. It was a great thing to have succeeded as he had done, when little more than thirty years of age. Everything he touched turned to gold, and now he possessed more than two million pounds; but there was nothing of the miser in his disposition, for it was not the gold that he loved, but the power that it represented, and it was ambition that directed his every step — save one. It was true that marriage with the woman he had chosen, Lady Mildred Blythe, would increase his social prestige, but it was not for that reason that he was about to offer her his hand and a share of his wealth. During his early years — that grim time spent on the Congo — he had not spoken to a white woman, the amassing of wealth had kept him too busy to think of love.

A month ago he would have laughed to scorn the idea of such a marriage and now he knew that everything else counted as naught, when weighed with his love for Lady Mildred. Even now he could picture her unerringly, with her beauty that moved him so strangely. And yet he realized that if she but knew what an inferno of passion she had aroused, her answer would be the refusal of his suit.

But there was no nervousness on his face when he was shown into the room where she awaited him. Lady Mildred did not rise from the chair, but gave him her hand and looked at him frankly.

"What news, Mr. Gaunt? How is that investment of mine?" she asked gaily.

But he could see the anxiety in her eyes. The woman he loved was poor, with that gnawing poverty of one who must keep up appearances.

"The shares have gone up fifteen shillings," he answered quietly.

"Then I have made ——?"

"About two thousand pounds."

"Can I have a check at once, for ——?" Lady Mildred stopped, and her face flushed painfully. She hated that this man should know that she so sorely needed the money; but poverty must sink its pride.

"You can have a check when you want. But I do not want to talk business, Lady Mildred — I am a blunt man, and I must come straight to the point. Will you be my wife?"

His eyes were fixed eagerly on her face, and it required a great effort to hide the passion that swayed him. But he would play the game as he had planned, and when he continued, his voice was almost devoid of expression.

"I am aware that you don't love me, but I am content to take you on your own terms. I won't insult you by remarking that I am a rich man. But money can be very useful. There is your brother — and ——"

"You wish to remind me that he is on the verge of bankruptcy. Let us be quite frank with one another. I

suppose you know that I shall accept your offer," she continued very quietly.

"I hoped that you would."

"You forget your boasted bluntness. You *knew* that I could not refuse — I wonder that you want me. There are many girls more beautiful, and with blood as blue in their veins. Why do you honor me?"

Gaunt longed to seize her in his arms and answer the question by fierce kisses.

"I have only met one woman in my life that I would care to ask to be my wife — and that woman is yourself!"

His voice was low and trembled slightly, in spite of his effort to control it. She looked at him curiously and a smile played about her mouth. Yes, he was eminently handsome and clean-looking, a man of whose appearance she would never be ashamed, and yet she was conscious of a feeling of something akin to fear. This man would endeavor to be her master, and the idea was extremely distasteful.

Prior to Gaunt's arrival she had decided to accept him, but now she was vaguely reluctant to do so. Were there not rumors of the manner in which he had gained his wealth? His connection with the Congo was enough to damn him in the sight of most people; but on the other hand, there was the great temptation to say "good-bye" forever to mean poverty — to wear jewels that would make her the envy of all her friends. And she loved luxurious surroundings.

To do Lady Mildred justice, there was no man for whom she cared, and no one would be wronged should she accept John Gaunt. And there was her brother to



be considered, for with the help of this millionaire, Geoffrey would be given a fair chance — the glories of their name might be renewed — and the Earl of Lynton take his proper place in the world. Then, too, there was her sister Ethel, who was not yet out of the school-room.

Gaunt watched her closely, for he realized that she was trying to make up her mind. Not for a moment had he imagined that she would hesitate, and he realized how heavy the blow would be should she refuse him.

Could she care for some one else? The mere idea caused him torments, and passionate words came near his lips. But no — he must not frighten her, for that would be fatal to his chance; and he moved away so that his face could not be seen.

"You are not going?" she cried hastily.

"I will stay, if you wish," he answered very quietly.

"I do wish. Mr. Gaunt, I will be your wife."

In a moment he was by her side and with his eyes fixed eagerly on her. Lady Mildred was almost frightened, now that she had promised to give herself to him; but she regarded him steadily.

"I am deeply honored."

The words were spoken very quietly, and he raised her hand to his lips.

"I should like our marriage to take place as soon as possible. I will see your brother to-night and arrange about the settlements," he continued gravely.

"You are very good, Mr. Gaunt — and ——"

"Mildred, my name is John," he suggested gently.

"Thank you, I won't forget it again, John. May I say that you are a very curious kind of man. You have never tried to make love to me—and perhaps that is why I have consented to marry you," she added reflectively.

"I hope you will like this ring."

He placed it on her finger, and she looked at it reflectively.

"You made very certain of my answer," she said a little coldly.

"I had chosen you for my wife, and I generally get my own way—sooner or later," he answered, and there was exultation in his voice.

"Yes. I think you would. John, you would make a bad enemy."

"But a loyal friend. Even my enemies in the City—and they are many—will tell you that I am a man of my word. I promise that I will always be good to you, Mildred. You shall never regret the promise that you have just made."

"I wonder if you are right? Would you mind leaving me now?" she said gently.

He hesitated and would have taken her in his arms had he received the slightest encouragement, but she merely gave him her hand, which he again raised to his lips.

Late that night John Gaunt thought over the great event of the day. His self-confidence was supreme, and he had not the slightest doubt that in time he would win the love of the woman who had promised to be his wife. His passion for her had only increased by reason of its relentless suppression, and he already looked forward to

the day when she would give him love for love, and kiss for kiss.

And a month later John Gaunt and Lady Mildred became man and wife.



## CHAPTER II

A YEAR passed and John Gaunt left his house in Park Lane to go to his office in the City. It was a joy to him — this daily battle of wits, and although he was as rich as mortal man could desire, there had been no thought of giving up his work.

During the drive his thoughts were with his wife, for there was naturally a little anxiety at such a time, but he remembered that Lady Mildred was physically a strong woman, and there was but little chance of any complication arising.

His secretary, Michael Foster, rose to receive him and placed on the table a pile of letters.

"I have dealt with all the rest, sir. That letter from Brussels seems to be rather important."

A frown appeared on Gaunt's face as he read.

"There is no end to the sickly sentimentality of the English. Why can't they mind their own business and leave the Congo to work out its own salvation?" he said irritably.

"I don't think that this will make much difference, sir. It's all talk, and none of the Powers dare make any practical move. It's England's jealousy of Germany, and *vice versa*, that ties their hands. But are things really so bad as people make out?"

"Do you mean — are the niggers compelled to work? If so, the answer is — yes, and the means used to make them are severe. But then, severity is necessary."

"But the cruelty and torture. I think ——"

"Then don't think; but if you must, pray keep your thoughts to yourself. I will answer this letter. About the Amanti Mine — has any cable been published yet?"

"No, sir."

"Good. What time is the appointment with Weiss and his crowd?"

"Eleven o'clock, sir."

Gaunt glanced at the clock and then thought for a few moments.

"Put out the cigars and you can go. Send them in as soon as they arrive."

"Yes, sir."

Alone, John Gaunt paced restlessly to and fro, and the expression on his face was not a pleasant one. To all intents and purposes the foundation of his vast fortune rested on "red rubber." It was the Congo that had supplied him with the capital necessary for his first financial schemes; and the revelations of the methods employed in that country annoyed him.

Punctually at the time appointed Weiss arrived. The man was a typical German-Jew, who had made a fortune on the Rand, and with him there came two other men of his race. The latter were also financiers and usually followed where Weiss led, greatly to the advantage of their pockets.

"Good-morning, Gaunt. There's a cable from the manager of the Amanti Mine just come in."

Weiss' accent was not that of the Jew of fiction and the stage, for he spoke slowly and correctly, and it was only by intonation that he showed his race.

"So it *has* arrived?" Gaunt answered quickly.

"Yes — and we thought it would be just as well to come to an understanding. To our joint account you have bought about twenty thousand shares at an average of seven and six."

"That is so, Weiss."

"Good. But may I point out to you that we — I and my two friends — have no evidence that they were bought to our joint account?" Weiss continued suavely.

"What do you want?" Gaunt demanded, and there was an ugly expression in his eyes, which the Jew did not observe.

"Just a little piece of paper, setting out the facts, and with your name to it."

"So that's your errand. Well, you won't have it, for I'm not quite a fool, Weiss. Let us suppose that the sending of this cable was traced to one of your instruments."

Weiss rose to his feet and gesticulated furiously.

"What do you mean?"

"I repeat that I am not quite a fool. I know that this cable is a fraud. That the shares will be rushed up — are being rushed up at the present moment — and that we shall reap a handsome profit. You and your friends will get your share of it. So you thought that you could hoodwink me, did you?"

"I don't admit that the cable is a fraud. But that doesn't matter. What concerns me is that we are entirely in your hands. You need give us nothing, if you don't want to."

"Quite right, Weiss; but you must remember that I happen to be honest according to my lights. No man



can say that John Gaunt ever went back on his word. If I make a promise I carry it out. Isn't that my reputation in the City?"

"Yes—but it isn't business," Weiss answered grudgingly.

"It happens to be my way of doing business on this occasion. I propose to sell when the shares are above a pound, and you shall have a check directly the deal is through. Good-morning."

As soon as Weiss and his friends had gone, Michael Foster entered carrying in his hand a slip of paper.

"Amantis have risen to twelve shillings, sir," he announced.

"Let me know when they reach a pound. Are there any more appointments this morning?"

"No. But Mr. George Braithwaite wishes to see you."

"Is he here now?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I send him in?"

John Gaunt nodded his head and dipped his hand into the box from which he took a big cigar. The end was cut neatly and the match applied with great care.

"Well, Braithwaite, what can I do for you?" he asked sharply.

There was a shamefaced expression on the face of the newcomer that gave him almost a shifty look, and his clothes showed many signs of wear.

"I am sorry to trouble you again, old chap; but things are very bad. I haven't a penny in the world and the family are ——"

"That is quite sufficient. You came to me a year ago

with a similar sort of story. I gave you a hundred pounds."

"You were very generous ——"

"And I told you that it would be the last time you got any money from me," Gaunt said curtly.

"I know that; but things are really bad. There's no food in the house, and the wife ——"

"I am a man of my word. Surely you should have realized the uselessness of this call. Have you ever known me change when I have once made up my mind?"

"I am desperate, Gaunt. We are starving ——"

There was truth in the man's voice. The words carried conviction with them, but Gaunt showed no sign of weakening.

"I once did you a good turn," Braithwaite said appealingly.

"You did—and I have repaid it many times over."

As he spoke his fingers pressed the button of the electric bell.

"Foster, my private ledger."

The secretary brought the book, and then disappeared in silence.

"You did me a good turn—it's quite true—and on no less than six occasions you have come to me for assistance. The last time I told you that it should end—have a cigar?"

Braithwaite rose to his feet and his body swayed a little.

"Look at that. It's a pawn-ticket for my wife's wedding ring," he said hoarsely.

"I don't wish to be rude, but I'm really busy. I am sorry for you but I can do nothing. You should have understood that the last hundred pounds was the end of my assistance. I told you so, and I am a man of my word. Good-morning."

"Gaunt, remember that we were boys together. You with your millions — and I starving. You can't refuse me. Only a sovereign. It will buy food. Ten shillings — even a shilling will get us bread."

"Not one penny."

"Curse you!" Braithwaite cried hysterically.

"Don't be melodramatic — just go — for I'm busy."

Gaunt felt a little regret when he was alone, but the feeling quickly passed. The fact that he had said that he would do no more for Braithwaite rendered anything but refusal impossible.

Soon he was again interrupted by the entrance of Foster, who announced that Amantis were still rising steadily. Afterwards lunch was brought to his room for he had found it impossible to eat in any public place. His face was so well known in the City that he was liable to be interrupted by the many people who sought favors.

After the meal was over his secretary came in to announce a visitor.

"The Reverend Edward Drake would like to see you, sir."

"Isn't that the parson who is working in the East End?" Gaunt asked.

"Yes, sir. There is an article by him in to-day's *Times*."

"Bring it to me."



Gaunt took the paper and rapidly scanned the column and a half.

"It reads all right. Quite straightforward and no whining. Send him in."

It was with some interest that Gaunt examined the clergyman's face, and he was not disappointed. Clean-cut features, noble in outline, steady eyes that regarded one frankly. The lips firm, but rather full; and the expression of the mouth was winning.

"What do you want? Money?" Gaunt demanded bluntly.

"You have guessed it, Mr. Gaunt. I see you have the *Times* there. If you have read my article, there is no need to say a word. I know you are a busy man," Mr. Drake said with a smile.

While he spoke the two men were regarding one another with overt curiosity and suddenly they both smiled. Gaunt's hand had gone to a drawer and he drew forth a check-book.

"Will that do?" he asked, as he handed over the pink slip of paper.

"You are more than generous. I am very grateful."

"Show your gratitude by keeping your mouth shut. I am not buying a baronetcy."

Mr. Drake had risen. There was a flush on his face, and he seemed to have some difficulty in speaking. Just then a bell tinkled on the writing-table, and Gaunt took up the receiver.

"Yes. Put me through."

He listened for a while, and his face became very white.

"I'll come at once," he said and threw down the receiver.

"Mr. Gaunt, I must thank you most——"

"Get out of the way, man. My wife's ill," Gaunt cried roughly, and seizing his hat, hastened from the room.

### CHAPTER III

“**C**AN nothing be done?” Gaunt asked in a voice that was hoarse from the supreme effort made to control it.

“We have done everything possible. The issue is out of our hands,” Sir Felix Hellier answered, with the ever ready sympathy which had helped him to attain so eminent a position in his profession.

“Will she die?”

Now there was only a great despair in Gaunt’s voice. The physician looked keenly at the famous millionaire; noted the lines of suffering on his strong face, and wondered. To the world, John Gaunt was a hard man, one whose only object in life was the attainment of wealth — one who would sacrifice ruthlessly to gain that end.

Twelve months ago he had surprised every one by marrying the beauty of the season — Lady Mildred Blythe — and the general comment was that the bridegroom was moved by social ambition; while the bride wished to exchange a life of aristocratic poverty for one of unlimited wealth.

And now the wife lay on a bed of sickness, fighting for her life; while the son which she had given to her husband slumbered peacefully in an adjoining room.

“Can nothing be done?” Gaunt repeated hoarsely.

His powerful face worked painfully, and now he made no effort to hide his distress.



"I am a rich man — and ——"

"Money cannot help you. The issue is in God's hands," Sir Felix said gravely, and turned towards the door.

"You are not going to leave her?"

"I can do no more. The nurse is quite competent."

"Stay and I will pay you any fee you like to ask," Gaunt cried passionately.

Sir Felix smiled slightly.

"There are patients who await me, and I may be able to help them. Here I can do no more."

"A thousand pounds if you will stay."

"Don't tempt me. If I could be of the slightest use I would remain. Good-night."

John Gaunt looked wildly at the door which had been closed so quietly. Then a deep groan came from his parched lips and he fell back heavily into an armchair.

Twelve hours ago he had been so content with his lot. Rich beyond the dreams of avarice — a beautiful wife whom he loved — and who he believed was beginning to care for him in return. How anxiously he had looked forward to the birth of their child. It was upon the coming of the babe that he had counted, to awaken in Lady Mildred's heart a love as passionate as his own.

Now she lay a-dying, and he could do nothing to help her. In that lay the sting. His check-book was powerless and it seemed strange that it should be so. If she should die — and he would never know the love that he had sworn to arouse.

The issue lay in God's hands.

In God's hands, and for years the name of the Deity had never been on his lips, save as an imprecation. In the piling up of his fortune, there had been no place for religion, and he had left his youth behind him with but one determination — to amass wealth — honestly if possible — but to amass wealth. And he had succeeded beyond his most sanguine dreams. There was not a financial pie of any magnitude in which Gaunt had not a finger; and his rivals in the city gave him their unstinted admiration. No brain was as keen as his when the result of a scheme meant money, and he was not the man to allow any delicate scruple to interfere with his plans. One principle he had — one that had helped him enormously, for John Gaunt's word was his bond, and if a bargain were once made, it would be fulfilled relentlessly, even should it result in loss. But this latter event happened very rarely.

The issue lay in God's hands.

Could he influence His decision? His mind went back to the time when his mother, a gracious God-fearing woman, was living — his mother — who had endeavored to teach him the religion which had guided her every action until the day of her death, when he was some sixteen years of age. It had been her custom to pray with him; but her influence had not lasted very long, for Fate took Gaunt to a strange land — to the Congo — in search of fortune, and in that country and with that object, religion must be left at home. So the teaching of his mother had been forgotten.

In God's hands!

Dare he approach Him? There was still the memory of the prayers that he had known, but there was also the

black record of the past. The scheming, the fighting, worse than that, the deliberate robbing within the scope of the law. He shuddered to remember the countless ruined lives which lay behind him in the pursuit of wealth.

Those terrible years on the Congo; the maiming and torturing of human beings; the shedding of blood to acquire wealth. With these sins on his soul could he go down on his knees and pray God to give him the life of the woman he loved?

John Gaunt was no hypocrite and he shuddered. There was not the excuse of ignorance; for as a boy he had gone to church and accepted God, only deliberately to throw Him aside when Christianity would have interfered with his ambition.

"I can't go whining back to Him now I want something," he said miserably.

How still everything was! There was something ghostly in the silence of the large library where he sat. Above him his wife lay battling for her life, and he could do nothing to help. Again he thought over what the famous specialist had said and he realized that in all human probability his wife was doomed.

Even now she might be dead. He rose and walked quickly up-stairs. A distant wail from the babe greeted his ears, and his lips were grimly pressed into a straight line.

The son and heir that would cost him his beloved.

Very carefully he turned the handle of his wife's room and entered. The nurse was standing by the bed and she came to meet him.

"How is she?" he whispered hoarsely.



"No better, I am afraid."

And he stood beside the bed where his wife lay breathing heavily. Even in that moment of agony he was struck afresh by her great beauty. Never had she been so dear to him, and he would willingly have given all that he possessed in the world to keep her with him.

Suddenly he fell on his knees and took her burning hand in his. The nurse moved away but he did not heed her. His eyes were closed, and his lips moved; but no words could be heard.

"I believe in God but I have put Him from my life. I have lived for my own ends and have committed many sins. I cannot hope that my prayer will be granted for I have done nothing to deserve any favor at Your hands."

Formal words of prayer would not come to his unaccustomed lips. He spoke as if he were addressing some fellow being.

"But as I have done evil in my life, so I have the power of doing good. Give me the life of my wife — give her back to me — and I vow the rest of my days to Your service. I will not pretend that I can become a Christian, but I swear to You — and I keep my word — that every action of my life shall be deliberately thought out and shall be taken in accordance with the teaching of Christ. I will try to right the wrongs that I have done. Grant my request and I swear by the memory of my mother that I will keep my side of the bargain in the spirit and the letter. Should I be in doubt at any time, I will go to the best Christian that I know and I will implicitly carry out his advice."

John Gaunt rose to his feet and there was a dazed look in his eyes. The nurse drew near and looked at him with deep sympathy.

“ Her breathing seems a bit easier, sir,” she whispered.

## CHAPTER IV

JOHN GAUNT'S eyes were fixed eagerly on his wife and the suspense was unbearable. Yes, her breathing did seem to be more regular. He took the nurse almost savagely by the arm and dragged her from the room.

"Tell me — is she dying?" he demanded hoarsely.

"No, sir. I think your wife is better. Take your hand away. You hurt me," she said gently.

"Sir Felix. Did he expect this change for the better?"

"No. He thought that she would gradually get worse."

"Is there a chance that she will live?" he asked, and his voice was tense with suppressed emotion.

"How can I tell? I am not a doctor."

"No — you're a fool," he said savagely.

He ran along the corridor and down-stairs to the library. There he seized the telephone book and looked up a number which he gave to the Exchange.

"Is that Sir Felix Hellier's house? — Is your master in? — Tell him that he is wanted immediately — Mr. Gaunt, Park Lane — I will come round myself."

His face worked with passion as he strode from the room.

"The car at once."

He gave the order to the butler and looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock.



"So he's not to be disturbed. We'll soon see about that," he muttered as he walked up and down the hall waiting to hear the sound of the car, and as soon as it arrived he rushed away.

"62A Harley Street, as quickly as possible."

The chauffeur looked at his master in surprise, but at the sight of his face he pressed in the clutch. There was no thought of tires or police as he speeded along to pull up with a jerk at the house. In answer to the ring a butler appeared and Gaunt walked into the hall.

"I must see Sir Felix at once. It is imperative," he said fiercely.

"My master gave orders that he was not to be disturbed. He is not well and has gone to bed. Mr. Percival will attend to any urgent case."

"Take my name up to your master."

"I dare not," the servant answered respectfully.

"Then stand aside."

So saying Gaunt passed and ran up the stairs. When he reached the landing he called forth.

"Sir Felix."

All was silent save for the heavy breathing of the butler who had followed, under the impression that he had to deal with a lunatic.

"Which is your master's room?" Gaunt demanded roughly.

"Who is there? What's the meaning of this?"

A door had opened and Sir Felix, clothed in a dressing-gown, appeared.

"It is John Gaunt. You must come at once. The nurse says that my wife is better."

"Mr. Gaunt, you forget yourself, I think."

"I only remember that you are my wife's doctor. She needs you, and you must come."

"You are acting very strangely. I left instructions that Mr. Percival should attend to any pressing cases."

"Sir Felix, you will come back with me at once. You told me that you could do no more. You said the issue was in God's hands. I believe that He has decided the issue. But I am taking no risks. You may be able to help, and must come with me."

"I think you cannot quite be responsible for what you are saying. I am not used to ——"

Gaunt almost pushed him back into his room.

"Get your clothes on and don't talk. I won't leave this spot until you promise to accompany me. Do you understand?"

The look of anger left Sir Felix's face and he smiled faintly.

"That's better. If my wife lives, there's a blank check, which you can fill in for any amount," Gaunt continued eagerly.

A few minutes later they were seated in the car and the rapid pace made Sir Felix utter an ejaculation.

"Is this quite safe?" he said deprecatingly.

There was no answer for hope had surged to Gaunt's heart and he could only think of what the next few hours would bring forth.

"I don't think you had better come in with me. You shall know at the earliest possible moment," Sir Felix said suavely, when they reached the door of the bedroom.

"I shall be in the library."

And there Gaunt went. An abstemious man—he poured out half a tumbler of neat brandy, which he

gulped down. His hands trembled as he endeavored to light a cigar.

The moments passed, oh, so slowly, and his agitation increased. What would be the verdict? Death, and with it the vanishing of all life's sweetness. Life — and — his wife.

How long it was he knew not, but at last Sir Felix entered.

"Lady Mildred has taken a turn for the better."

"She will live?"

"I cannot say yet, but there is hope. Why don't you lie down and rest? It may be an hour or two before I can tell you definitely."

"Rest — what do you think I'm made of? Have you any idea what my wife means to me?" Gaunt asked hoarsely.

"Still I think you should rest. You have evidently been enduring a great strain," Sir Felix persisted gently.

"Go back to her, and I will await your verdict."

"Your wife has a wonderful constitution. Ninety-nine out of a hundred women would have already succumbed."

Sir Felix cast a curious look at the bowed head of the millionaire and went back to his patient. The nurse was standing by the side of the bed and holding a spoon to Lady Mildred's lips.

"She has recovered consciousness, sir," she whispered.

The eyes of the sick woman followed the doctor as he approached, and her lips moved.

"My baby."

"Fetch the child, nurse."

"Doctor, I thought I was dead — am I dying?"

"No — not if you want to live. It rests with yourself."



The sound of a cry — not feeble, but almost shrill, and that wonderful “mother-look” came into Lady Mildred’s eyes. The baby was placed by her side, and as it nestled to her breast, she sighed.

“I shall not die — with this ——”

The words, little more than a whisper, could scarcely be heard. The nurse held her breath and bent down to her patient, while Sir Felix’s fingers rested on Lady Mildred’s pulse, and it was evident that he, too, was full of anxiety.

“My little baby.”

Her breathing now was more regular, and the faintest tinge of color came to her cheeks.

“She is asleep,” the nurse whispered triumphantly.

“Hush !”

Neither of them moved, and the pulsations told their tale to the physician. It was a long time that they waited, and at last Sir Felix withdrew his hand. And now his thoughts were of the husband. Only too well did he know the reputation of John Gaunt — heartless in his pursuit of fortune — and yet he must love this woman to distraction. The world, too, had its opinion of Lady Mildred. Her life, until a month or two ago, had been that of the ultra-fashionable woman of to-day. Apparently thoughtless of everything save the extraction of every possible enjoyment from each moment of her life. What was there in her to arouse so great a passion in such a man as John Gaunt? True she was very beautiful, but that in itself was not sufficient to account for such a love.

“The man behaved like a madman,” he muttered to himself.

Should he go down and relieve him of his anxiety?

No. This time there should be no mistake, and he would wait until he could be absolutely certain.

In the meantime John Gaunt was pacing restlessly to and fro. Deep lines had appeared on his face, and his eyes were strained. The stronger a man's character, the greater his capacity for suffering, and Gaunt was a strong man. As the minutes passed his agitation lessened — not that he suffered any the less acutely — but his mind had become dazed.

He thought over each event of the day. His actions in the City, and he vividly remembered his interview with Braithwaite. Had the man succeeded in obtaining money, or was his family still without food? Not that he felt any greater sympathy for him — he only wondered.

Then the deal in Amanti shares, and he muttered an exclamation of anger when he remembered that he had forgotten to leave instructions with Foster.

"Surely he will have the sense to realize," he muttered.

Yes. That was a smart piece of business, and would net in a few thousands.

Then came the visit from the parson. He was glad that he had been generous, and he smiled wanly at the memory of his abrupt departure. What agony he had suffered as he hastened home — what hours of torture which had culminated in that moment when he had knelt by his wife's side.

He, John Gaunt, had prayed. Every word that he had said was burnt into his brain.

*"Give me the life of my wife, and I vow the rest of my life to Your service. Every action of my life shall be deliberately thought out, and shall be in accordance with the teaching of Christ."*

He trembled when he remembered the words, and a feeling of awe overwhelmed him as he realized what he had promised. The trembling increased until it reached every limb, and his step was a stagger as he endeavored to reach a chair into which he fell back heavily.

"I have made a bargain with God," he said hoarsely.

It was immediately after he had risen from his knees that the nurse had told him that his wife seemed to be a little better. Was that an answer to his prayer? Had the bargain been ratified from above?

To John Gaunt the silence of the room seemed death-like. He tried to moisten his parched lips and then suddenly leapt to his feet.

"What was that sound?"

The handle of the door turned, and Sir Felix appeared; a reassuring smile on his face.

"My dear sir, I am happy to tell you that your wife is out of danger."

Gaunt staggered, fell back and clutched wildly at the chair. Sir Felix ran to the table and brought a glass of brandy.

"Drink this. Ah! That's better. Now you must go to bed. A good sleep and you will be all right."

Still Gaunt did not speak. His eyes had a vacant look and his lips were tremulous.

"Thank you, Sir Felix. Don't stay any longer. It was good of you to come. Good-night."

"Take my advice and go to bed. Good-night," Sir Felix said drily.

John Gaunt never knew how long he rested there motionless, save for the twitching of his limbs. There was much to be thought out. His wife would live.



God had decided the issue, and now there was his own side of the bargain to be fulfilled.

His quick mind told him what the vow meant — the upheaval of his life — the changing of everything — “red rubber” must go — the Amanti deal — everything must be different.

Could he carry out what he had promised — honestly, and completely?

Suddenly his face cleared and he rose. There was a steady light in his eyes and his lips were pressed firmly together.

“God has kept His side of the bargain, and, by Heaven, I’ll keep mine,” he said in a low voice.

At last he slowly made his way up-stairs and paused at the door of the room where his wife lay. Sir Felix had been mistaken in saying that she would die, so might he not be equally mistaken in his judgment that she would live? As he entered the nurse looked at him, a sympathetic smile on her face.

“Don’t make a sound, sir. She is sleeping so peacefully,” she whispered.

He stood by the side of the bed and he was reassured, for the change was wonderful. At her breast the child lay, and the sight brought a choking sensation to his throat. This atom of humanity was their child — his son and hers. Now there was no doubt in his mind that Lady Mildred would love him, and in time, as passionately as he loved her. How strenuously he had fought to win her. With what care he had considered his every action towards her. And the result had been negative. Each overture had been received with a smile and deftly turned aside. Since their wedding day there



had been no frankness between them. Perhaps Lady Mildred had discovered the intensity of his feeling towards her, and was half afraid of it.

The baby moved restlessly and in an instant the nurse had taken it up, and was hurrying into the next room.

"Please don't take him away."

Lady Mildred had awakened and she spoke appealingly to the nurse.

"Very well, my lady. But you mustn't let him disturb you."

"He won't trouble me," Lady Mildred answered softly, as the child once more nestled to her breast.

Then for the first time she realized that her husband was present, and a faint tinge of color came to her cheeks.

"Isn't he a dear?" she whispered, and he bent over and reverently touched her forehead with his lips.

"You must not talk," the nurse said firmly.

"Just a few words more," Lady Mildred said, and her eyes were fixed on her husband.

Gaunt gave a little gasp at what he saw in them. There was something akin to love, and he bent down eagerly to hear what she was about to say.

"I thought I was dying, John. I imagined that my soul had left my body when you came and took me by the hand—it was you, John; and yet you were very different. Don't laugh at me, dear, but it almost seemed as though an angel were by my side. Your face was very beautiful, and your eyes shone with a strange light. And as you held my hand I felt that I was not dead, but that I must struggle to live. Your lips moved and uttered strange words of prayer. I struggled to live, and

then — I can remember no more. But wasn't it a funny dream? Just think of it — John Gaunt an angel!" she whispered whimsically.

"Mr. Gaunt, I must ask you to leave the room at once. It is essential that my patient should rest," the nurse said severely.

"Run away, dear. I want to get well," and Lady Mildred turned to her baby.

Gaunt once more kissed his wife, and then, with a sense of awe, his son.

His step was buoyant as he walked to his room. His valet, drowsy-eyed, rose to perform his nightly duties, but was summarily dismissed. But Gaunt had no wish for bed, for he knew only too well that sleep was far away. There was so much to be thought over — the wonderful love that he had seen in his wife's eyes, and a few hours ago he had imagined that she was lost to him. A shudder shook him at the memory of it, and then his mind naturally turned to the vow that he had made. Now that he was relieved of immediate anxiety about Lady Mildred, he had time to think what it really meant.

He had promised that every action of his life should be in keeping with the teachings of Christ. There could be no shuffling from the issue, for a solemn bargain had been made. God had fulfilled His part, and the rest remained with himself. A grim smile twitched at his mouth as he began to understand the revolution to which he was bound. Slowly memory was returning and his thoughts went back to his boyhood.

The teaching of one's youth is never really forgotten. It may lie dormant for years, but even in old age it will return.

At fourteen years of age religion had been a very real thing to him, thanks to his mother's influence, and he had striven to follow her teaching. He could remember that his nightly prayer was not merely the formal utterance of words, but was the expression of what was truly in his mind. Yes ; as a boy he had honestly endeavored to lead a Christian life, and he had been neither a prig nor a hypocrite.

And for the last fifteen years his every thought had been of self. His only guide had been ambition, and its accompanying desire for wealth.

The brain has an odd way of turning to subjects that are out of keeping with one's frame of mind, and Gaunt found himself wondering if Foster had sold the Amanti shares, and if the price had been a suitable one.

Why had those shares been bought? Because of his knowledge of the fraud.

There could be no doubt that if he intended to keep his vow, it was not possible for him to participate in such profits.

And thus it was brought acutely to his mind what his future life must be, unless he would perjure himself.

A follower of Christ in the City, and he laughed discordantly at the idea.

## CHAPTER V

THE Reverend Edward Drake lived in the East End of London. Although in Holy Orders, he held no living, nor yet a curacy ; but busied himself in doing good according to his own ideas. His study was the only room in the house that was properly furnished, and on its walls were displayed many athletic trophies, which he had won at Oxford.

The chair in which he sat bore signs of wear, and might have been a legacy from his undergraduate days. The pipe, which was gripped by even white teeth, was charred and battered, and was evidently an old friend.

The remains of a substantial breakfast lay on the table, and Drake quickly read the letters of the morning. When he had finished, his old housekeeper brought him a note which had just been delivered by a messenger.

It was from John Gaunt, and asked for an appointment at the earliest possible moment.

*"I am quite willing to come to you, but should you be near the West End to-day, I shall be glad if you will call. Perhaps you will lunch with me."*

"The man is very polite. I wonder what he wants?" he muttered.

It was but yesterday that he had been to Gaunt's office, when he had received a check for so unexpectedly large an amount. Although they had been together but a few minutes, he was intensely interested in the millionaire. For one thing, he had been unable to fix



Gaunt in his proper place. He could not decide whether his predominant traits were good or evil and he longed for an opportunity to find out. It was natural that he should imagine what untold good could be done by a man with the power of millions in his hands. As a matter of fact, during his return from the City to the East End, Drake had been dreaming dreams. He had been planning what he would do if he were the possessor of such wealth, and the problem proved to be fascinating in the extreme.

After a little consideration he decided to lunch with Gaunt, and so scribbled a note to that effect which he gave to the messenger. Then he started on his morning's work with whole-hearted energy. It was a pitiful task, for he had devoted his life to the submerged—to those victims of misfortune and incompetence or laziness, or drink, who dragged out their weary existence in hidden corners and out of sight.

First he would try to give them a little physical strength by feeding them, and then to give them an opportunity of making another effort to regain their foothold on life. It was marvellous how successful he had been, although at times despondency held him in its grip. But now, thanks to Gaunt's generosity, he would be able to enlarge the scope of his work, and carry out many new schemes.

To his astonishment a luxurious motor-car pulled up before his house, which he found had been sent by Gaunt to take him to Park Lane. A smile lit up his face as he sank back against the comfortable cushions, for his rather shabby attire was strangely out of keeping with such magnificence.

A crowd of urchins had gathered round, and they gave a wild cheer when he started. Drake looked back and gaily waved his hand.

"I feel as if I were out on the spree," he said aloud.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" the chauffeur said politely.

"Don't mention it. What a very fine car you drive."

"Yes, sir. It's a sixty horse Magnus," the man answered proudly, and then proceeded to tell the numerous good points *his* car possessed over every other in the market.

Drake listened with a pleased smile, for he was enjoying himself immensely.

"I wonder if I might sit in front with you?" he remarked ingratiatingly, and the chauffeur put on the brake. "I like to watch you working the pedals."

But Drake sighed a little when the car stopped before the Gaunt palace, as though his holiday had come to an end. But it was not so, for lunch was ready, and the millionaire and himself were alone. How dainty everything was! Not too much magnificence for comfort. Then the food and the wine. Drake was no gourmet, but he liked his meals to be nicely cooked and would always prefer a bottle of beer to a cheap claret.

"I suppose this wine is very expensive," he said reflectively, and then blushed furiously as he realized the bad taste of his remark. "Forgive me, Mr. Gaunt, but I so seldom eat with any one that I fear I get in the habit of talking to myself."

Gaunt smiled, for he was beginning to feel a liking for Edward Drake. There had been a little doubt when he had sent the letter, but the doubt had quickly disappeared now that they had been together for a while.

"Do you smoke?" Gaunt asked abruptly.

"Yes. It is my one extravagance," Drake replied.

As soon as they reached the library, Gaunt went to a cabinet, and from it chose one of the cigars which he kept for himself and his most intimate friends. Drake snipped off the end and carefully applied a match. Then he threw himself back into the chair and took two or three luxurious puffs.

"It is almost worth while being a millionaire," he remarked meditatively.

"May I send you a box?" Gaunt asked politely.

"My dear sir, I couldn't think of accepting such a gift. No — no. I must be content with my pipe. But you are very generous, and I thank you."

Gaunt knew that it would be useless to insist, and he respected Drake the more for his decision. He too lit a cigar and brought his chair near the other one.

"Mr. Drake, I don't quite know how to begin," he said doubtfully.

"Take your own time."

"I am afraid that you will think me a trifle mad when you hear what I have to say. First I want you to answer me a question — and frankly. Will you do so?"

"To the best of my ability," Drake answered gravely, for he recognized that Gaunt was grimly in earnest.

"Why did you come to me for a check? From what you knew of my character, did you think you were likely to get one?" Gaunt asked bluntly.

"My experience tells me that checks are often obtained from the most unlikely quarters."

"Then you considered me an unlikely quarter? Frankly, what have you heard about me?"



"You wish me to tell you — frankly?"

"Yes," Gaunt cried impatiently.

"I've not heard much to your credit. They say you aren't too particular about the way you make money — so long as you make it. Then your connection with 'red rubber' does not predispose people in your favor."

"Thank you."

"But I've always heard that you are a man to be trusted. You hold a promise to be a sacred thing, and that is something nowadays. Since yesterday, I can place generosity to your credit, and now that I know you personally, I am inclined to think that you have not allowed the world to see your true character. Am I right?"

"God only knows what my real character is. At any rate rumor hasn't lied, I've been a thorough bad lot — how bad, I am only just beginning to realize."

Gaunt paused, and the two men looked at one another in silence.

"I would like to be your friend, and help you in any way that is in my power," Drake said quietly.

"That's why I sent for you. I want your help, and you're the only parson I've met in whom I should care to confide. I believe that you are a man — a man of God, and such a one can help me."

Again Gaunt paused, and it might have been thought that he was nervous.

"I am a priest, and anything you may say will be held as spoken in confidence," Drake said earnestly.

"When I left you yesterday so hurriedly, I came here; and Sir Felix Hellier told me that my wife was dying. I cannot describe to you my sufferings, for she is very dear to me. For a while I was in the deepest despair



and had given up all hope. I am no Christian, Mr. Drake. I have not allowed religion to influence me one iota; but I remembered the teaching of my childhood, and as the last resource of desperation, I prayed."

Gaunt's voice had sunk almost to a whisper, and Drake realized that he was deeply affected.

"I offered God a bargain — in return for my wife's life I promised that I would endeavor to act as a Christian and that each action of my life should be dictated by the teachings of Christ."

Drake started up in his chair, and his hands tightly clutched the arms. There was an expression of extreme wonderment on his face.

"Your wife is living — and ——"

"Yes. My wife will live. Almost immediately afterwards she took a turn for the better," Gaunt answered quietly.

Again there was a silence, and Drake lived each second of it. His eyes were fixed keenly on Gaunt's face, and he could see nothing ignoble there. It was strong, but could human man carry out such a vow? He wanted to speak but dared not. Like a flash it was revealed to him what a great issue was at stake. Should this millionaire be honest enough to carry out his vow, untold good would result. But his hope fell instantly. Such a man as Gaunt — who had lived as he had lived, could not revolutionize his character by the mere making of a vow. To keep such a bargain was an impossibility — and — yet ——

Yes. There was a steady look on Gaunt's face. He did not flinch, but had the air of one who was weighted with a great burden.

"Why have you told me that?" Drake demanded hoarsely.

"I haven't yet finished. I went further than I have said, for I vowed to right the wrongs that I have done. Just imagine what that means. It's a Herculean task," Gaunt said with a laugh that contained no mirth.

"Still I do not quite understand why you send for me," Drake said quietly.

"Because I don't know what to do, and I want your advice."

"You intend to carry out the promise you made to God, not merely in the letter, but in the spirit?"

"I intend to keep my promise, and at the time, I made no reservations. I understood what I was saying and I consider my wife's life worth any sacrifice," Gaunt answered doggedly.

Drake did not speak but gave the millionaire a searching look. His brain was working at high pressure, for he realized that Gaunt was serious in his intention of performing his vow.

"I wonder if you have any conception of the magnitude of your undertaking?" he asked very quietly.

"I am just beginning to catch a glimpse of it. As I have already told you I am not a Christian, but I have some idea of the meaning of religion. I realize that I shall have to regard everything from a different point of view, and I fear that the task is beyond me. That's where you come in."

"Still I do not understand."

"It's simple enough. I'm going to make you my conscience. You know exactly what I have got to do, and it will be your duty to see that I do it. I can fore-

see many situations which will require delicate judgment, but I have confidence in you. I now formally offer you the post of private chaplain to John Gaunt, millionaire, at any salary which you like to name. It strikes me that the post will be no sinecure," Gaunt wound up quickly.

A look of distress came into Drake's face.

"I cannot accept such a position. The responsibility would be too great."

"Think a moment. Remember the power for good that will rest in your hands. Dare you refuse my offer?"

"It is such a vast thing. To right the wrongs that you have done. How can you contemplate the task so calmly? Do you forget the origin of your fortune? Do you forget the Congo? — with its cruelty and torture?"

"I forget nothing. What I have promised I will endeavor to carry out," Gaunt said quietly, but his face had grown very white.

"It may be your duty to use your millions to fight the rulers of the Congo — to compel them to make the iniquities cease? Do you realize that and can you carry it out?"

"Yes. To know me thoroughly, Drake, you must understand that I don't value my wealth one jot, save for the power it gives me."

"I believe the man is in earnest," Drake muttered, and he gazed at Gaunt with something akin to admiration. "Will you give me a day to think over the proposal?" he continued aloud. "I don't like to take up a thing like this without careful consideration. But if my answer is 'yes,' you may be sure that I will not look back."

"I am quite willing."

"But I must say at once that I can accept no salary. Fortunately I have an income of a few pounds a week that obviates the necessity. I am glad of it, for I shall feel more comfortable — if I accept your offer."

"You must please yourself. So long as you say 'yes' I shall not grumble. Now let us leave the subject until you have made up your mind. You will find me at the office to-morrow morning. No — don't light that cigar again. Let me give you another one."

Drake took it, and was about to strike a match when the door opened, and a girl rushed in.

"John, I have just left Mildred. Let me congratulate you both. The baby is a dear," she said brightly.

"Ethel, may I introduce to you Mr. Drake, a clergyman who I hope will be our domestic chaplain. Mr. Drake, this is my sister-in-law, Lady Ethel Blythe," Gaunt said with a grim smile.



## CHAPTER VI

LADY ETHEL BLYTHE was some five years younger than her sister, and had not yet formally entered society. It was only recently that she had returned from France where she had received her education, and had since been staying with relations in the country, until she had received news of the birth of her sister's child. That morning she had arrived in Park Lane, and it was the first time that she had met John Gaunt since the wedding.

"I did not know there was any one with you — and may I ask why you are about to start a chaplain? I was not aware that you were religiously inclined, John," she said mischievously. Her manner was quite self-possessed and she bestowed a curious look on Edward Drake.

"Mr. Gaunt is speaking of what is not yet settled," the latter said with an air of embarrassment, which was not lost to Lady Ethel's keen eyes.

"If I have interrupted you, I will go. That wretched nurse has forbidden me the room. She says that I excite the patient too much."

She moved towards the door but Gaunt called her back.

"We have quite finished our little talk, and will be glad if you will give us some tea," he said politely.

Drake glanced hastily at his watch and uttered an exclamation.

"I had no idea it was so late. It is after four o'clock," he cried in surprise.

"You must manage to spare a few more minutes. I will ring for tea at once," Lady Ethel said peremptorily.

Drake followed her with his eyes, and her beauty was a revelation to him.

A woman always knows when she has aroused a man's interest, and when Lady Ethel returned there was a mischievous smile on her face. It must be remembered that she was little more than a girl, and had not fully realized the power that beauty gives to a woman, but she saw that this good-looking clergyman liked her.

"Will your chaplaincy necessitate your residence with us?" she asked gravely.

So Lady Ethel lived with the Gaunts, and Drake made a mental note of the fact.

"We have not yet discussed that," he replied with equal gravity.

"I should much prefer that it should be so," Gaunt broke in decidedly. "It would give me a much safer feeling, to have my confessor at hand."

"John, have you become a Roman Catholic? How interesting!" Lady Ethel cried.

"I belong to the Church of England," Drake answered shortly, and he gave Gaunt a warning glance.

There ensued a light conversation between Lady Ethel and Drake to which Gaunt listened and from which he obtained a little amusement.

"Decidedly my sister-in-law is a flirt, and the parson will be an easy victim. Well, it's his lookout, and he must take care of himself," was his thought.

At last Drake took his leave, and it was arranged that

he should call at Gaunt's office in the morning. Lady Ethel was very gracious as she bade him good-bye, and when the door had closed she turned to her brother-in-law with an air of innocent triumph.

"I hope I made a good impression on your friend. I tried my best," she said cheerfully.

"You must have mercy, Ethel. I forbid you to make him fall in love with you."

"He seems very nice for a parson, and he's quite good-looking. I like him," she said emphatically.

Gaunt smiled indulgently as she chattered away, but he was going over in his mind the recent interview with Drake. There could be no doubt of the gravity of the task he had undertaken, and he contemplated it with disquietude, but not for a moment did he weaken in his resolve.

"You are not listening to me, and I shall leave you," Ethel cried with simulated anger.

"I am going up to see Mildred—that is, if she's awake. You had better not go near her again. You talk too much, child," he said drily.

When Gaunt reached the hall, Sir Felix Hellier was descending the stairs, and so he waited for him.

"How is my wife?" he asked anxiously.

"She is much better, and you may be quite easy in your mind. It is a wonderful recovery," Sir Felix answered with some complacency.

"Would you mind coming into this room for a moment? I want to ask you a question."

Gaunt led the way and there were obvious signs of nervousness when he faced the doctor.

"You remember when you left my wife yesterday, I

mean on the first occasion, when you told me that you had done all you could, and that the issue lay in God's hands?"

"Yes," Sir Felix said impatiently.

"I want you to tell me frankly — when you left, did you think that she was dying?" Gaunt asked eagerly.

"I thought that the case was hopeless. Of course, the best of us are liable to make mistakes, but I am of opinion that it is something in the nature of a miracle that Lady Mildred is alive," Sir Felix answered gravely.

"Do doctors often make such mistakes?"

Sir Felix flushed at the question, but he quickly saw that Gaunt had no intention of being impertinent.

"I tell you frankly that in my opinion your wife ought to be dead. Upon my soul, I don't understand why she is alive," Sir Felix answered irritably, and it would almost appear from his manner that Lady Mildred had committed an offense in living.

"Then your science is at fault," Gaunt said quietly.

"In this case — yes."

"Thank you, Sir Felix. One thing more. I owe you an apology for the unceremonious way in which I fetched you here last night."

"Pray don't refer to it. Under the circumstances, your conduct was quite excusable. Good-bye for the present. I shall look in again to-night," Sir Felix said, a trifle pompously.

Gaunt was deeply moved by the doctor's answers. It was quite evident that Sir Felix could not understand Lady Mildred's recovery, and from that moment John Gaunt became convinced that he owed his wife's life to the prayer that he had uttered. Residence amongst the



natives of West Africa does not make one less superstitious, and when among them he had seen strange things that apparently could not be explained by the ordinary rules of life.

So now it was upon him to carry out his side of the bargain. His face was very grave when he entered his wife's room. Lady Mildred was awake, and her face brightened when she saw him.

"Isn't he simply sweet?" she whispered, and drew aside the clothes so that he should obtain a better view of the baby.

In answer Gaunt kissed her gently on the forehead, for he could not trust himself to speak, and he moved away. There had been such a terrible fear that his wife would go back to her old manner, and he was relieved to find that there was a tender love in her eyes and she seemed unfeignedly glad to see him.

"I thought that I had lost you," he blurted out suddenly.

"Poor John. You must have had a terrible time. But it's all right now, and I intend to get well as soon as possible." She paused a while. "I don't think I have been quite fair to you in the past, dear. But never mind, I will make up for it in the future," she whispered.

"Do you mean ——?"

He did not complete the question, but she understood, and a vivid flush came to her cheeks.

"I think I have been very selfish, dear. This little one has already opened my eyes to many things. Shall we go for a long cruise in the yacht and ——"

"Yes, I will give orders at once and we'll start as soon as you are strong enough," he broke in impetuously.

"Yes. It will be delightful. Just you and I and the baby."

Suddenly she began to laugh very quietly, and the nurse came hurrying up.

"You must not excite her ladyship. I think you had better go," she said severely to Gaunt.

"No, it's all right, nurse. I will be good," Lady Mildred cried. "But I was thinking of my dream. Of you as an angel, John. It was too funny for words. You don't seem to see the joke?"

John's face had grown whiter for he was once more living through the terrible hours of yesterday. This strange dream of his wife's went a long way to confirm him in the belief that he owed her life to God's intervention. Therefore he would fulfill his vow completely and honestly and at any cost to himself.

But would his wife help him in his endeavor? It was too absurd for consideration, for if he were to tell her of his determination she would laugh the idea to scorn. Lady Mildred's guiding motive in life was her own enjoyment, and nothing else.

True, she did go to church, but her visits were very rare, and then only for the sake of appearances. No, Gaunt could expect no sympathy from that quarter—in fact he would probably meet with opposition.

It was evident that his future actions would be likely to excite comment among both his friends and enemies. With the latter it would be easy to deal, but friends have an unfortunate knack of claiming explanations as a right.

"You are very serious, John," said Lady Mildred, and Gaunt was recalled to the present.

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It was sufficient for the moment to know that his wife regarded him very differently.

"Mildred, I think you are beginning to care for me," he said in a low voice.

In answer her hand moved towards him and lay there ; but she did not speak.

## CHAPTER VII

EDWARD DRAKE walked the whole way back from Park Lane to Whitechapel. He was one of the many men whose brains work more quickly when the limbs are in motion, and he had much to occupy his thoughts. At first sight it seemed ludicrous to imagine that Gaunt would fulfill a resolution made under such circumstances. The issue was stupendous, and would change his life in every detail if it were carried out conscientiously. But although he had known Gaunt for a short time, he had come to the conclusion that Gaunt was a man of no ordinary character. Most men would have calmly forgotten their promise, and it was to his credit that he had remembered it seriously. In addition, Gaunt had sent for him, and had made a proposal in a quiet businesslike manner. Therefore to all appearances he had decided to keep his side of the bargain.

Before he had reached home Drake had decided that Gaunt's offer was honestly meant, and that it was not merely a salve to his conscience, to be thrown aside at the first opportunity.

There were people waiting in his house, and it was typical of the man that he at once started work, and for the time, dismissed from his mind the subject that had been engrossing him. It was late before he had finished, and after supper he settled himself comfortably before the fire, for the purpose of thoroughly thrashing out the problem.



Curiously enough he imagined that he could see in the brightly burning coals a face, and it was not that of Gaunt, but of Lady Ethel. A smile twitched at his mouth for it was pleasant to remember so radiant a young beauty. Of women Drake knew nothing, for as a youth he had been too shy to enjoy their company; and the shyness had only vanished after he had become acquainted with so many real tragedies of life. One who lives habitually in the midst of intense human suffering must naturally lose all consciousness of self.

He found it quite an effort to banish the memory of her from his mind, and to concentrate his thoughts upon the problem before him.

It was true that Edward Drake was a Priest in Holy Orders, but above all he was a Christian and to him creeds were of little value. It was his honest endeavor to live as he believed Christ would have him live.

His ambition was to do the greatest amount of good to the greatest number of people in the time that was at his disposal. His work in the East End was of benefit to many, but he believed that there were others who could carry it on as efficiently as himself. Therefore he was in no way tied to it. Having settled this to his own satisfaction, the next question concerned the seriousness of the intentions of John Gaunt. If the millionaire meant what he had said at their interview, there could be no doubt that it was his duty to help him to carry out his intentions to the best of his ability.

It was not only John Gaunt's honor to be considered, but the power and influence of his millions. With such wealth behind him there was no limit to the benefits which might be conferred on the poor and suffering.

Drake's face grew very grave when he remembered the one subject that was wont to fire him with the fiercest indignation — the Congo Free State — and the abominable atrocities that were being committed there.

John Gaunt's wealth was founded on the tortured labor of the natives of West Africa, and John Gaunt had vowed to right the wrongs that he had committed.

Drake jumped up and began to pace restlessly to and fro.

"I will be this man's servant. I will endeavor to direct him in the way he should go," he said, and his voice was filled with a grim resolve.

He knelt beside the chair and prayed for guidance, and when he rose to his feet there was a glad light in his eyes. It was the face of a born fighter — a face ablaze with enthusiasm for a good cause. And now his only fear was that John Gaunt would not have the strength to fulfill his vow. But his fears grew less when he remembered the impression that the millionaire had made upon him.

When he awakened in the morning, it was with the feeling that something good had happened, and he rushed through his work as quickly as possible. It was twelve o'clock when he reached Gaunt's office, and as soon as he arrived he was conducted into the private office. Gaunt rose to receive him, and held out his hand.

"Have you decided?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. I am your man. But first I would ask you one question. Have you thoroughly weighed the consequences? Are you prepared to go through with it at any cost?" Drake asked earnestly.

"I intend to keep my promise," Gaunt answered doggedly. "I am beginning to appreciate that the thing is even bigger than I had imagined. What is it, Foster?" he asked irritably of his secretary who had brought to him a slip of paper.

"Ah—Mr. Weiss. Ask him in," he said when he had glanced at the name.

"Will you see him while this gentleman is here?" Foster asked quickly.

"Yes," Gaunt rejoined curtly, and then turned to Drake.

"I think this will be the first example of what I shall have to put up with. Listen to what we say, and Weiss will probably make things clear to you. I had better warn you that personally I come out of this business rather badly," he wound up with a grim smile.

Weiss entered, and his face bore an affable smile.

"Well, Mr. Gaunt, I think we've done pretty fair out of that deal. What price did you get?" he asked.

"It's no use beating about the bush, Weiss, but I don't think you are going to get one penny piece out of the Amanti profits. It all depends upon this gentleman's decision when he has heard the facts," Gaunt said pleasantly.

Weiss started to his feet, his face ablaze with indignation and fear.

"I don't know anything about this gentleman. I know I want a check, and I'm going to have it, unless you've turned thief," he cried furiously.

"Listen to me and I will explain," Gaunt answered suavely, and he exchanged a significant look with Drake.

"A short time ago," Gaunt continued quietly, "Mr. Weiss and his two friends came to me and suggested a deal in Amantis. At the outset I suspected that there was something wrong, for neither of those gentlemen is a philanthropist, and if all had been straightforward, there was no reason to ask me to participate in their scheme. As a matter of fact, it had been arranged that a forged cable should be sent from the mines announcing a fresh and valuable discovery of gold — and we were to take our profits on the rise which would naturally ensue. This has been done, and I reckon that about twenty odd thousand pounds have been cleared. Do I make myself quite clear, Drake?"

"I don't see how our business concerns this gentleman," Weiss cried truculently. "Give me the check and let me go."

"Have I made a fair statement of the case?" asked Gaunt.

Edward Drake was watching the scene with keen interest, and he was wondering what Gaunt would decide to do. It was quite clear that this enormous profit had been procured by fraud, and this would be a test of the strength of the Vow.

Weiss was beside himself with rage and amazement so that for a while he was incapable of speech, but soon he grew calmer and told himself reassuringly that this was but a joke that was being played upon him.

"Look here, Gaunt; this has gone far enough. You know that my time is valuable and I want to get off. Just calculate our share and let me have a check like a good fellow," he said with a cheerfulness that he was far from feeling.



"I don't intend to keep the profits, neither do I intend that you shall touch one penny piece of them. Look in to-morrow's *Times* and you will see an announcement that will interest you," Gaunt said pleasantly.

Now Weiss realized that it was no pleasantry and his voice became loud and there was menace in his eyes.

"Very well, Gaunt. It's no use discussing it further just now, but I'll just say that if I don't get a check in the course of a week, I'll make things pretty hot for you. It seems to me that you are not yourself this morning, and it's only fair to give you a little time for consideration. I can be a dangerous enemy as you'll find out. Good-day. Come along," he said to his friends, and they followed him obediently.

Drake drew a deep breath when they had gone but made no remark, although there was an inquiring expression in his eyes that brought a smile to Gaunt's face. The latter touched the bell, and Foster entered, note-book in hand.

"Take down this letter," he said sharply. "'To the secretary of the King's Hospital Fund — I have pleasure in enclosing a check for twenty' — let me see, what are the exact figures? — 'twenty-nine thousand, three hundred and fifty pounds for the benefit of the Fund. This is a gift from Mr. Julian Weiss and two friends, and I shall esteem it a favor if you will acknowledge the receipt of same in to-morrow's issue of the *Times*. I do not wish my own name to appear in the matter.' Have that typed at once and send it off by hand. How will that do?" Gaunt asked turning to Drake.

"It seems to be one way out of the difficulty — but

what about the holders of the shares who have sold on the strength of the forged cable? Surely they ought to be considered?" Drake said thoughtfully.

"Ah — that didn't occur to me. But still, I'll send the check off. I promised Weiss something interesting in the *Times* to-morrow and he shall have it. As to the owners of the shares, I'll instruct the brokers to offer them back at the price they sold to me, but I'm afraid that they will think me mad," Gaunt said ruefully.

But there was a smile on his face when he rose.

"I am rather enjoying this experience — up to the present. But enough of business for to-day. Come with me to Park Lane, and we'll have a long talk after lunch. I want your advice on many matters. By the bye, I hope you have decided to reside with us?" Gaunt asked abruptly.

"Yes — but not until I have got everything into working order at home."

"How long will that take?"

"About a week, but for some time to come I must continue to visit the East End," Drake answered, and then suddenly burst into a fit of hearty laughter.

"What amuses you?" Gaunt asked drily.

"Only the memory of Mr. Weiss's face. I am afraid that he received a terrible shock."

"Which to-morrow's announcement will intensify. By the bye, what do you think of me now? You must realize that I was a participator in a fraud, and had it not been for this Vow, I should have taken my share of the 'swag.' Don't try to mince matters, and if the discovery has made any difference do not hesitate to say so," Gaunt said grimly.

Drake did not answer for a moment and his expression was very grave.

"I never imagined that you were a saint, neither had I thought you capable of an act which amounts to pure and simple theft. You see I am speaking frankly, but still I think you are serious in your intention to perform your vow; therefore everything of the kind in the future becomes impossible," he said in a low voice.

"I am glad that you look at it in that way, for there's much worse in store. That is if I am to do the thing conscientiously. To begin with there's the Congo, and I intend to tell you the truth — the truth," Gaunt repeated emphatically.

Drake shuddered and some of the color left his face.

## CHAPTER VIII

IT was the first time that Lady Mildred had left her room since the birth of her child and she was lying on the couch which had been drawn close to the fire. Her sister, Lady Ethel, was standing by her side and regarding her with an amused smile.

"I don't quite understand this husband of yours, for he doesn't live up to his reputation. I have been with you for a fortnight and my eyes have not been shut, my dear. I always understood that John was a very modern financier, but from what I have seen he might be in training for a parson," Lady Ethel said laughingly.

"John is not an easy man to understand, but I have never noticed any tendency towards religion," Lady Mildred answered.

"Don't you know that Mr. Drake—a clergyman from the East End—takes up his residence here to-day?"

"John did mention that some one was coming to stay with us, but surely he does not intend that the parson should be a fixture?" Lady Mildred said with a frown.

"That's what I gather, and I'm quite sure that there's some mystery about. Your worthy husband and Mr. Drake are always talking together in the library, and when I make an appearance, the subject, whatever it is, is quickly dropped."

"What sort of a man is this Mr. Drake?" Lady Mildred asked musingly.



"Oh, he's all right, for he doesn't thrust religion down your throat. In fact, I'm always forgetting he's in the Church and I'm afraid that at times he's rather shocked by some of my remarks. But I like him."

There was a knock at the door and a nurse entered, carrying in her arms the baby. "Let me have him. I'll be very careful," Lady Ethel cried eagerly.

With great gentleness she took the sleeping child and sat down on the couch beside her sister, while the nurse, at a nod from her mistress, left the room.

The young girl, radiantly beautiful, crooned a lullaby and she did not hear the door open to admit John Gaunt and Edward Drake.

"May we come in, Mildred?" the former asked quietly, and his wife smiled in reply. "This is Mr. Drake," Gaunt continued. "I want you to like him."

She looked up and her eyes quickly scrutinized this new friend of her husband, and the examination apparently satisfied her, for she held out her hand and spoke graciously.

"I am glad to know you, Mr. Drake. My sister was just speaking of you."

Drake longed to know what Lady Ethel had said, and he was aware that there was mischief in the latter's eyes, as he murmured his thanks to Lady Mildred for her welcome.

"You must not stay up too long, dear," Gaunt said anxiously, and Lady Mildred flushed slightly at the concern in his voice.

During these last few days a feeling of embarrassment had sprung up between husband and wife, and there had been no intimate talk between them. Lady Mildred

was conscious of a shyness in Gaunt's presence that she could not understand while he was determined to take no risks, but to be patient until he was absolutely certain of the state of her feelings towards him.

"Have you given orders to get the yacht ready?" Lady Mildred asked suddenly.

"Not yet, for I find that I sha'n't be able to leave England for a month or two," he answered hurriedly.

"Of course, if your business is so pressing, I should not think of asking you to make any sacrifice," she answered, but he could see that she was hurt by his reply.

But it was one of the disabilities of the fulfillment of his vow, that he could not leave England until many things had been done, and when he spoke his tone was apologetic.

"My hands are tied for a while. I have no choice, Mildred, or I would not hesitate to go at once. If you wish, the yacht shall be got ready and you can take your sister with you for company until I can join you."

"You are very good, but I don't think that I am very keen on going. After all it would have been rather dull — just you and I," she answered coldly.

Lady Ethel took the baby back to the nurse and a few moments later Drake excused himself with the plea that he would finish his unpacking.

"Why have you brought that man to live with us?" Lady Mildred asked when she was alone with her husband.

"I like him," Gaunt answered emphatically.

"Yes. But that is not an answer to my question."

"Have you any objection? If so, I can very quickly alter the arrangement."

"No. I don't wish that. You have the right to ask any friend you wish to your house."

"If you dislike the idea, I will ——"

"No — no. You misunderstand me," she interrupted him hastily. "I was only thinking that it was a little strange that you should make a clergyman a member of our family. I have never noticed that you were religiously inclined," she wound up drily.

"Mildred, dear, will you be patient with me? It is my intention to make a great change in my life, and I want your help and sympathy."

A look of surprise swept over her face.

"Surely you haven't lost all your money, or anything dreadful of that kind?" she cried.

"No. But even if I had, you would be quite safe. Your settlement was a quarter of a million, and that can never be touched," he answered grimly.

"May I ask the reason of the change you propose?"

"First of all, I shall give up business in the City. As soon as possible I shall retire from all the companies in which I am interested, and shall invest my capital in gilt edged securities that are easily realized. But a great deal of this capital I intend to use, and it is probable that in a few months' time I shall be only a moderately wealthy man."

Lady Mildred had listened with eager attention, and was evidently very puzzled by the announcement.

"It is certain that you can do as you like with your money. As you say, I and the child are provided for by the settlement," she remarked frigidly.

Gaunt was silent and there was a hesitating look in his eyes for he was wondering if it were possible to tell his

wife of the vow that he had made; but it was certain that she would not understand, and so the idea was quickly abandoned.

"Mildred, I had hoped that we were going to be better friends," he said impulsively.

"Is that possible, John? I think we are a model couple for I cannot remember that we have ever quarrelled," she answered nervously.

"I wish that you cared for me sufficiently—to quarrel. I sometimes wonder if you suspect how much I love you. A few days ago—when you were so ill—I imagined that, that you loved me even as I love you."

"My dear, I am afraid that you are growing sentimental. Really, John, you are full of surprises. Of course I love you."

Their eyes met, and his were filled with so great a passion that she grew afraid and rose quickly.

"I am very tired, and the doctor said that I must not overdo it. I think I will retire," she said hastily.

Gaunt proffered his arm and together they walked in silence to her room, at the door of which she dismissed him with a smile. He went to the library, and sat down to think over what had taken place. It was certain that Lady Mildred had been hurt by his refusal to set off on the yacht at once, and he cursed the necessity of refusal, but there was no alternative if he was to keep faith.

These last few days had revealed to him some of the difficulties that lay before him, and for the moment he was dismayed, but it was typical of the man that there was not even a temptation to turn aside from the course that he had mapped out.



His reverie was interrupted by the entrance of Drake and Lady Ethel, both of whom were in the best of spirits, for they were chatting together gaily and it seemed to Gaunt that the man whom he now called his father confessor was enjoying himself thoroughly.

"Mr. Drake, I will play you a hundred up," said Lady Ethel.

"I can't play billiards," Drake replied ruefully.

"Then it's time you learned and I will teach you."

"I shall be delighted," he answered.

Gaunt looked after him, and then called out.

"Drake, I want to have a long chat after dinner, so please don't make any promise to amuse this young lady," he said drily.

A slight flush came to Drake's face as he answered quietly.

"I shall be at your service, Mr. Gaunt."

And Lady Ethel threw him a glance that was full of mischief.

## CHAPTER IX

THE footman brought the coffee which he placed on a table between the chairs on which Gaunt and Drake were seated and then withdrew silently. Neither of them spoke but their faces bore an expression of great gravity, for they realized that they were about to discuss a question of vast importance, and that this discussion was likely to be a momentous one.

"I suppose it is the Congo?" Drake at last ventured to say.

"Yes — compared with that, all my other sins are light. To fulfill my promise I must try to remedy the state of affairs that I helped to bring into existence," Gaunt said quietly.

"I know a good deal of its history, but I wish that you would tell me something from the inside. I want to be able to understand from your point of view," Drake answered.

"It's a gruesome subject, but I will do as you ask. It is only within the last few years that Europe has begun to grasp a little of the truth — of the infamies, of the murderings and torturings that have been committed in the name of civilization. I must go back to the commencement, and I will admit that when the late King of the Belgians entered into the agreement with Stanley to represent him in making treaties with the natives, he had no intention of exploiting the country in the way he did.

King Leopold gained the consent of Europe and the United States to forming the Congo Free State with the plea that he wished to develop the country for the good of its inhabitants. In fact he termed himself a philanthropist and promised that the natives should be his first consideration. And so in 1884 the Congo Free State was formed under the benign auspices of the Great Powers of the world — England and America being especially interested. For some years — until 1891 — these promises were more or less faithfully carried out, and the country was developed, the natives being paid for the work they did. But the Belgians are not born colonizers, and the financial position became desperate. King Leopold had sunk fifty thousand pounds of his own money, and in those days he was not a rich man. I suppose it is unnecessary for me to refer to the late King's private life, to his licentiousness, to his extravagance, to his —— ”

“ Quite so,” Drake broke in hurriedly. “ *De mortuis nil ——* ”

“ That maxim may apply in ordinary cases, but to one with the crimes that lay on the soul of King Leopold —— ”

Gaunt broke off with a shrug of the shoulders, and lapsed into silence. His eyes were moody and Drake thought he could detect something of shame in their expression.

“ An Englishman — the late Colonel North — invested a large sum in one of the companies formed to exploit the rubber trade and that was my first connection with the Congo. I went out there determined to amass wealth, and I arrived just about the time that King Leopold was beginning to discover that he owned a little

gold mine. Hitherto the natives had been paid for the rubber which they collected, but it occurred to his Majesty that such a payment was unnecessary. Accordingly he appropriated the land, the produce of the soil, and the labor of the people — in spite of the promises to the great powers of Europe. It was but natural that the natives would not submit to such robbery without a struggle, and so the Congo raised a vast army of natives to carry out this policy."

Drake was deeply interested, and his eyes were fixed eagerly on Gaunt.

"I will only tell you what I saw with my own eyes," the latter continued. "I was sent to the Mongalla district. I arrived at the house of the chief of the post and I noticed a little crowd gathered in front of it. A woman was strung up to a post, and a huge native was flogging her with a weapon they called the *chicotte* — a whip of rhinoceros hide that cuts deeply into the flesh. A white man was counting monotonously and he had reached the number one hundred and ninety. He stopped when he saw me, but the native continued to strike. 'What is the matter?' I cried. The officer looked at me in surprise. 'She is the wife of a chief who won't bring in his rubber,' he replied. I looked at the woman, and she was dead."

Drake shuddered, and his face had grown very white.

"Didn't you interfere?" he asked hoarsely.

"What could I do? I was out there to make money, and use soon accustomed me to such sights. I won't go into details, but will merely say that human life and suffering were held as naught. The orders were that so much rubber must be sent down the river, and the only



way to get the natives to collect it was by the fear of death and torture."

"Had you a direct hand in this business?" Drake asked in a low voice.

"No—but I profited by the method in which the rubber was obtained. I don't want to harrow your feelings, but I tell you that every pound of rubber that has come from the Congo has been and is being produced by the wholesale murdering and torturing of the natives," Gaunt said solemnly.

"You use the present tense. Surely now that the Congo has been taken over by Belgium, things are better?"

"Not one whit—and they never will be better so long as a Belgian remains in power."

"But the new King. He is of good repute, and——"

"The new King will not have the slightest power to alter the conditions. Years of rapine and murder have reduced the Congo to such a state that the present methods must continue. The alternative is bankruptcy," Gaunt answered.

There was horror on Drake's face, and his lips were pressed into a straight line.

"When the Belgian government took over the Congo," Gaunt continued, "they gave a pledge that the condition of the natives should be improved immediately. I have means of obtaining information of what is really taking place, and I saw that they have no intention of relinquishing their methods of obtaining rubber by murder and torture. But they have promised to open the Congo to the trade of the world in three stages. That is, they have divided the country into three portions. The first

is to be opened out in a few months, but I may say that that portion is one that has already been devastated by murder and the land has been depleted of its one valuable product — namely, rubber. A year later a second portion is to be thrown open — by that time it will be in the same state as the first."

"It is dastardly," Drake broke in angrily.

"No date has been given as to the opening out of the third portion — and for a good reason — the country is practically untouched, and they propose first to exhaust it by their usual methods. When the country has been drained dry — when the Belgians have earned their millions, then, and not till then, will they admit the foreigner."

"Do you mean to say seriously that now — at this moment, the Belgians are collecting rubber in the same way as they did in the past?" Drake asked in a whisper.

Gaunt nodded his head.

"Yes. They think it is a simple matter to fool Europe as they have done in the past. There are companies with a capital of a few thousands that pay an annual dividend of a quarter of a million pounds. You can readily understand how it is done. Their labor costs them nothing, and every native has to work six days out of the seven to bring in his allotted weight of rubber. If he fails he is flogged to death and his family is imprisoned. Thousands of women have been flogged and starved, because their men have not been able to bring in the required quantity of rubber."

"And this is the twentieth century — it seems incredible!"

"But the state of things has been proved by innumer-

able trustworthy witnesses. It is strange to me that the British people have not been fired by the hearing of such atrocities. I suppose the Congo is too remote a country," Gaunt said reflectively.

Drake had risen and began to pace rapidly to and fro. His brow was puckered into a frown and it was evident that he was deeply moved.

"I don't think that we have ever *really* realized it. These poor innocent natives, butchered in cold blood, and all for the sake of gold. And they are white people as ourselves who reap the profit from this slavery."

"Their condition is worse than slavery," Gaunt said quietly.

"Can nothing be done? Are we quite helpless?" Drake cried passionately.

There was no reply and there was something akin to contempt in the look that he gave Gaunt.

"You are a rich man, and you say that your wealth was founded on this base traffic. You are in the confidence of these monsters who are wringing gold by murder and torture — can you think of no remedy?" he cried vehemently.

"It is a difficult question. Europe is too busy with its own affairs to concern itself. Righteous England has only been able to talk and threaten and has been afraid of deeds. Belgium has taken advantage of this, and has calmly gone its own way, secure in the knowledge that we should confine ourselves to words."

"But there must be some way of helping these poor people," Drake said desperately.

"If you can suggest anything I shall be glad to listen to you. I appreciate that it is my duty to do all that

lies in my power. I place myself in your hands, Drake ——”

“It is an awful responsibility. But I will find a way. This talk with you has brought the grim reality before my eyes. I shall know no rest until we attempt something to help. At this moment innocent people are being done to death. It is infamous.”

“There is no alternative while the present people have power. Unless they force the natives to work rubber will cease to come in. The people are broken and the land devastated to such an extent that it will take generations to recover. If the Congo is to be governed equitably, it will be necessary to sink millions in the country instead of draining them out. No, Drake, the position is hopeless so long as the Belgians rule the Congo.”

“I will not believe it. There must be some remedy for such a heart-breaking state of affairs. No punishment would be too great for the men who have perpetrated this crime.”

Gaunt did not speak but concentrated all his attention on the fresh cigar he had taken from the box.

“Are you with me heart and soul? Would you make any sacrifice to help this downtrodden people?” Drake asked, and now he spoke quietly and calmly.

“I repeat that I am in your hands,” Gaunt replied.

“God will help me to find a way.”

The words were spoken confidently and the two men stared at one another steadily.



## CHAPTER X

A FORTNIGHT passed and Gaunt made no further effort to arrive at an understanding with his wife. They met but seldom, and always in the presence of Edward Drake or Lady Ethel, so that he came to the conclusion that Lady Mildred was desirous of avoiding any intimate conversation with him, and in this supposition he was right.

As a matter of fact Lady Mildred was unsettled in mind, and did not quite know what she herself wished. It must be remembered that love had never touched her heart, and she much preferred to keep her feelings well in hand, for she imagined that to care for a man deeply would cause her more discomfort than pleasure.

Lady Mildred was physically strong and she had completely recovered her health; in fact motherhood had added to her beauty, for it had given a gentler expression to her face and had banished a great deal of the coldness that had been there. A drive in the park had brought a fresh color to her cheeks so that when she reëntered the house, her sister looked at her with undisguised admiration.

"Mildred, I am only just beginning to realize how very beautiful you are," Lady Ethel remarked. "I am not surprised that your husband adores you so openly."

Lady Mildred made no reply but took off her coat and turned away her face so that her sister should not see the flush that had come to her cheeks.

"Will you ring for tea?" she said quietly.

Lady Ethel laughed slightly as she touched the button of the bell, and there was still a smile on her face when she took a seat by the side of her sister.

"I think you are a very lucky woman and ought to be very happy—but I don't think you are, Mildred," she remarked frankly.

"Are you not just a little impertinent?" Lady Mildred said coldly.

"No. Only curious, which is the prerogative of youth. I quite like this husband of yours, although when I first saw him at the wedding, I thought him rather hateful, and wondered how you could marry him."

"You forget that John is a rich man," Lady Mildred said bitterly.

"No. I don't forget, for I am quite sure that you would never have married for money alone. I have been watching you two rather closely of late and sometimes I think you care for him much more than you will allow any one to see."

As she spoke she looked steadily at her sister, and was pleased to see that her words were not without effect, for Lady Mildred was very angry.

"You talk like a sentimental schoolgirl. You imagine love to be the most important thing in the world."

"So it is, my dear, and you'll find it out some day. Let me give you a little sisterly advice. John is by no means an ordinary man, and I warn you that he may be driven too far. Perhaps you won't know his real worth until you lose him. As I said before, I have been keeping my eyes open and it is very evident that your

husband is in trouble of some kind. I wonder you don't speak to him frankly and offer to share it. You would be received with open arms," Lady Ethel said with unwonted seriousness.

"If John has worries, I am ready to help him to the best of my ability."

"Why don't you tell him so?"

"It is not my place to ask for his confidence. You really are going too far, Ethel. I think I will rest till dinner time," she said wearily.

But when she reached her room Lady Mildred made no attempt to sleep, for she was strangely disturbed; instinct told her that there was a good deal of truth in what Lady Ethel had said.

Did she love her husband? The question could not be answered readily, although she realized that her feelings towards him were very different to what they were at the time of their marriage.

Before she began to dress for dinner, a visit was paid to the nursery and she took the baby in her arms and pressed it closely to her breast. Its eyes were open and it struck her very forcibly that the child was more like her husband than herself, and she was conscious of a twinge of jealousy, but the feeling quickly passed and again she remembered John Gaunt's never varying kindness. Did she love him?

Her lips reverently touched the baby and she turned away with a sigh. As she slowly dressed, a determination was born — a determination to give her husband a chance, and to allow him to approach more closely to her.

During dinner Gaunt was very quiet but as soon as the meal was over he rose from the table.

"Mr. Drake and I have an engagement — if you will excuse us," he announced quietly.

"Is it important? I rather wanted to talk to you," Lady Mildred answered with unwonted tenderness.

"I am sorry. It is a meeting about the Congo, and ——"

"Will you take me with you?" Lady Ethel broke in eagerly.

"Do you wish to listen to a recital of horrors?" he asked brusquely.

"I should like to go. I am interested in the Congo," she answered.

"I, too, would like to go," Lady Mildred said, and the two men were surprised at the announcement.

"I think you would be wiser to stay at home," Drake said nervously.

"I wish to go," Lady Mildred rejoined coldly.

Gaunt shrugged his shoulders and made no further objection, but he was very silent during the drive to the hall, where the meeting was to take place. They entered a building that was packed from gallery to floor and on the platform were many well-known faces. The Archbishop of Canterbury was the chairman and he was supported by the heads of the free churches, while notabilities from every branch of life were present to add weight to the protest against the crime of the Congo.

Eloquent words were spoken — words that deeply stirred the hearts of the vast crowd as they listened to the description of the sufferings of a people who were powerless to help themselves. Then a manifesto was read which had been issued and signed by every well-known divine in the country.



"Twenty-five years ago we sanctioned the formation of the so-called 'Congo Free State,' on the ground of its being a 'humane and benevolent enterprise.' We invoked the divine blessing upon an undertaking which was intended to work to the benefit of the inhabitants of the country. To speak of those hopes as falsified is to use too mild a term. The basin of the Congo is to-day the scene of as cruel a tyranny as exists on earth."

Lady Mildred listened with the deepest interest. Like the great mass of the British people she had read something of the state of affairs, but no lasting impression had been left on her mind. But the eloquent words to which she listened brought the whole cruel tragedy vividly before her mind.

John Gaunt had founded his fortune on "red rubber," and John Gaunt was her husband.

Her eyes happened to rest on his face and she saw that he was very pale—what were his thoughts of this scathing indictment of a nation? She dared not think.

"Where are you going, John?" she whispered hoarsely.

A speaker had just sat down, and Gaunt was making his way rapidly to the platform which he quietly mounted and turned to face the audience.

"I am John Gaunt and I wish to speak," he said in a clear ringing voice.

A murmur arose, and the chairman whispered to those near him.

What could this millionaire wish to say to them? This man whose gold had the taint of blood.

Lady Mildred's breath came quickly and the time

seemed interminable as she waited for her husband to continue his speech.

Edward Drake watched the scene with a feeling of intense excitement, for he had no idea what Gaunt was about to say. It was but a few hours ago that the subject of their presence had been discussed. The meeting had attracted a good deal of attention and it chanced that during the afternoon, Drake was reading an article in the *Times* when Gaunt entered the library.

"Mr. Gaunt, I think that the time has come for action," Drake cried eagerly. "Have you read this leader about the Congo?"

"I have just glanced at it. Isn't there a meeting of some sort to-night?" was the careless answer.

"Yes, and I think you ought to be present. A fortnight has passed and we have done nothing," Drake replied energetically.

"What do you suggest?"

"This meeting is intended as a weighty protest against the inaction of the English government. The speakers are eminent men and there can be no question about their disinterestedness. If such a man as yourself raised a voice, the effect would be increased a thousandfold."

"You mean because of my connection with the Congo?" Gaunt asked thoughtfully.

"Yes. The public more or less connect you with the Congo Free State, and if you were to relate your experience, it would have an enormous influence for good. During these years while a war has been raged against this iniquitous rule the burden has rested on the shoulders of one man — the secretary of the Congo Republic Convention. He has pluckily fought a battle with pub-

lic apathy, but little can be done without funds. You have said that you are prepared to spend your wealth in righting the wrongs which you have committed. In what better way can you do so than by joining hands with those who are strenuously endeavoring to obtain justice for the natives of the Congo?" Drake said earnestly.

"There is something in what you say, but have you thought how such an action would affect me personally? My Belgian friends will say I have 'ratted,' while if I tell the brutal truth my English friends will call me a black-guard, and refuse to associate with me. You must remember that the Belgians have always denied that any atrocities have been committed."

"The statement by you will remove every doubt," Drake cried impetuously.

"It is rather a large order to ask me to do this. I think you know that if I do undertake it, I shall not mince matters," Gaunt said quietly.

"So much the better. Under the circumstances I do not think that you have the right to consider yourself personally. You have led me to believe that you are honest in your determination to fulfil your vow. If this is true, you cannot hesitate for a moment."

"I quite understand your point of view, but I must own that I had not anticipated any such public action as you suggest."

"Do you honestly wish to help the natives of the Congo?" Drake cried vehemently.

"I haven't considered them—I am only thinking of myself," Gaunt answered drily. "Perhaps you will be quiet for a few minutes."

Drake watched him eagerly, and when the minutes passed he grew despondent for he recognized that he had set a difficult task, and one that would require courage of a high order to carry out.

"Surely I was not mistaken in this man," he told himself hopefully.

Gaunt rose and crossed over to a cabinet from which he took a cigar. Still he did not speak and the silence continued for some time.

"You are not going to draw back?" Drake cried in desperation.

"No. I will accompany you to the meeting."

"Thank God! And you will bear witness to ——"

"I will make no promise," Gaunt interrupted him quietly.

Drake possessed tact and he recognized that it was not the moment to apply pressure. If a decision had been arrived at, nothing he could now say would change it, and he must possess his soul in patience.

The fact that Lady Mildred and her sister were to accompany them disturbed him greatly, for it was but natural to think that their presence might cause Gaunt to modify any statement that he intended to make.

But Drake did not yet fully understand the character of John Gaunt.



## CHAPTER XI

**D**URING the last two weeks Gaunt had been working hard in the City and had made arrangements for relinquishing his active life. Tempting propositions had been brought to him but they had been firmly refused, and the general impression was that he had made sufficient money to satisfy even his requirements and was about to retire.

There was no attempt to disguise from himself that the chief matter with which he must deal was the Congo, and he brought all his intellect to bear on the problem before him. But the difficulties seemed well-nigh insurmountable.

Now that he knew his position, it was characteristic that he would not discuss the matter with Drake until he could see daylight. The suggestion that he should speak at the meeting was distasteful in the extreme, but finally he decided that refusal was impossible.

When he faced the thousands of tense faces he was calm and collected.

"Have I your Grace's permission to speak?" he asked of the Archbishop.

The latter rose and cleared his throat.

"My lords, ladies and gentlemen. Most of you know the name of John Gaunt, and I feel sure that you will be interested in one who must have unique knowledge of the subject we are discussing," he said, and resumed his seat.

"I thank your Grace, and promise that I will detain you for but a few moments. I have listened attentively to all that you have said and I tell you that the condition of affairs in the Congo has not been exaggerated. I do not intend to shock you with horrors, but with my own eyes I have seen men, women and even children murdered in cold blood, maimed and tortured."

He paused, for a hoarse murmur had arisen so that it was a few minutes before he could continue.

"I admit that I myself have made money through labor which has been procured by these means. My wealth is founded on the 'red rubber' which has come from the Congo. I tell you this so that you shall know I am quite honest in what I am about to say, for I shall speak against my own pecuniary interests. You have been discussing the effects of the annexation of the Congo by the Belgian government, and some of you have expressed the hope that matters may be improved thereby."

He paused, and the silence was intense.

"Your hopes are doomed to disappointment. There can be no improvement in the conditions, for any improvement would necessitate the abandonment of the slavery which exists. I said slavery—but it is hardly the right word, for in modern history slavery has not meant work forced by the fear of death or torture. Wherever the late King held active sway, there the country was laid waste by the sword, and rubber was produced not with any idea of the future but solely for immediate gold. The abandonment of the present system can only be accomplished by the abandonment of the Congo by the Belgians. That they will not do

unless compelled by superior force. Their present budget anticipates a profit of nearly a million pounds. If the land and produce of the soil be returned to the rightful owners — the natives — then, instead of a profit, there would necessarily be a heavy deficit. When the Congo budget provides for a deficit and not a huge profit, then and not till then will you know that the natives are about to receive fair treatment. That will occur only when the country has been drained dry. If you hear that a portion of the country has been opened to the foreigner, you will know that that portion is worthless, for the population will either have been killed or have fled from the fear of death, and the produce will have been exhausted."

This statement made a profound impression, and all anxiously waited for Gaunt to continue.

"You are seeking the amelioration of the natives. To accomplish this you must remove the present officials. There must be no half measures and I am convinced that no amount of talk will have the slightest effect. Actions and not words are required, and it is for you to see that England does more than talk. A single gunboat at the mouth of the river would affect a change, while diplomatic representations will be swept aside as has been done in the past. Surely England is strong enough to act alone — or is it fear of Germany that ties her hands? If this be the case, it is not the spirit that won our empire, and as a race we are doomed. Let there be no more hesitation, let each of you use his influence and bring pressure to bear upon our government."

"We have already done everything in our power," a bishop interrupted vehemently.

"Then I fear that the reform of the Congo is impossible. But let us make an effort. I am a rich man—rich, largely through the Congo—but, if money is necessary, I am prepared to spend every penny piece of it on this work. More than that, I now publicly announce that from this moment I am the enemy of the governors of the Congo. Any ability that I possess shall be used to affect reform."

There was a murmur which developed into loud cheers, and there was a look of defiance in Gaunt's eyes as he listened.

"My lords, I feel that I owe you some personal explanation. You must have viewed my appearance here with mingled feelings, for I am aware that I am looked upon as one of the strongest supporters of the present régime. You all know the name of Edward Drake, who has done such good work in the East End of London, and I refer you to him should you have any doubt as to the honesty of my intentions. It is owing to his influence that I am here to-night."

Gaunt paused for a moment and the Archbishop rose to his feet.

"I am sure that we have listened to Mr. Gaunt's statement with profound interest. From one point alone what he has said is invaluable. His evidence will remove every shadow of doubt as to the atrocities that have been and are taking place in the Congo. I must own frankly that I looked always upon him as one of our bitterest enemies. I have been ashamed to think that an Englishman could have profited by cruelty and torture. Surely God must have brought him here to-night. We must all admire the courage with which



he has spoken. It was no light thing to face us and frankly admit the sins of the past, and I honor him for what he has done. He has taken the only course open to a Christian, for he has promised to do his utmost to right the wrongs in which he has been a participator. Before Mr. Gaunt resumes his seat, I should like to ask him one question. Naturally he is in touch with the rulers of the Congo — would it not be possible for him to use his influence with them, to bring pressure to bear upon them that they should govern the natives equitably ?”

The Archbishop resumed his seat and Gaunt continued :

“No personal influence or pressure would effect any change. There is only one effective weapon — force. The position of England has caused a good deal of cynical amusement in the Congo. The British government would only move if so great a feeling were aroused in this country that they dared not do otherwise. Much has been done in recent years by meetings and writings in the press ; but the Congo is so far away that the truth has never been driven home. The question of Tariff Reform or Free Trade can rouse fierce passions, for the principle touches our pocket ; but that thousands of human beings should suffer torture — that is a thing to read and be harrowed about — but a cup-tie is of much more immediate importance. Perhaps I am unjust to my fellow countrymen, for at times they have been aroused to white fury by the story of oppression and murder. Witness the Armenian atrocities. But then there was a great man with a silver tongue who could move a nation by his words. And the only chance for

the people of the Congo is that such a man should rise again and tear from us our complacency. Make the British people understand that they have been cleverly swindled. The late King played the confidence trick upon America and the great powers of Europe. He deliberately hoodwinked them with his tongue in his cheek. But King Leopold was a master 'crook.' He was a born diplomat of the most unscrupulous type; and to his dying day he was a match for every foreign secretary that crossed swords with him. And he has left worthy lieutenants behind. I dare prophesy that we shall again receive the most specious promises that reform will take place at once—say in a month or two; but the date will always be a few months ahead until they have drained every grain of gold from this most unhappy country. Again I say that I am prepared to spend my last penny in helping you in your work."

John Gaunt bowed and then stepped down from the platform. His face was set as he walked straight to the place where he had been sitting.

"Where is my wife?" he asked of Drake who sat alone.

"She went away with Lady Ethel about five minutes ago," Drake answered, and his eyes were shining luminously as they rested on Gaunt.

"I think we had better follow them. Come along," the latter said curtly.

And all eyes were fixed on Gaunt's face as he strode from the hall. When he drew near the door a cheer arose which gathered in volume until it became deafening.

"Let us walk home," Gaunt said quietly, and for a time they made their way in silence.

"Mr. Gaunt, you were splendid," Drake said in a low voice.

"I am glad that you are satisfied," he answered drily. "Do you know why my wife left?"

"No. She wouldn't allow me to accompany her."

"Do you think that she was angry? Did she say anything to you?"

"Nothing, but I thought that she was disturbed," Drake answered hesitatingly.

Gaunt once more lapsed into silence, and they walked rapidly along until they reached his home.

"There is a gentleman waiting to see you, sir," the footman said deprecatingly.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Braithwaite, sir. I told him that you were out, but he insisted upon waiting. In fact I couldn't get rid of him."

Gaunt uttered an exclamation of impatience, and went at once to the library.

"What are you doing here?" he asked roughly.

"Thank God you've come, Gaunt. You must let me make some money. We haven't had a meal for two days and the children are starving," Braithwaite said piteously. He was a broken man and tears were in his eyes.

"I told you that I had helped you for the last time, and when I say ——"

Gaunt stopped and an expression of dismay came to his face when he remembered his vow.

"For pity's sake ——" Braithwaite appealed.

"No, for the sake of my word," Gaunt answered as he drew a case from his pocket from which he took a couple

of bank notes. "Take these and I'll give orders that a basket shall be got ready for you. It's too late for shopping to-night. No thanks, please."

"May God bless you," Braithwaite said fervently, and he was crying quietly.

But Gaunt made no reply.



## CHAPTER XII

**A**S soon as his visitor had gone, Gaunt took a cigar and sat down in an armchair before the fire. Very carefully he thought over the events of the night, and it seemed to him that he could not have acted differently, although at the meeting he had said more than he had intended. It was his wife that troubled him, and the effect which his speech would have upon her. Here he was totally in the dark, and he began to understand that he knew very little of Lady Mildred's real character.

"I had better get it over at once," he said, and hastened up-stairs.

He turned the handle of his wife's bedroom, only to find that the door was locked.

"Mildred," he called to her.

"I am tired. Good-night."

The words were coldly spoken and he went away at once, but he had no wish for bed and so returned to the smoking-room where he found Drake awaiting him.

"Braithwaite has spoken to me. You have the pleasure of knowing that you have made one man supremely happy," the latter said earnestly.

"I do not know that that gives me any great pleasure. At first I refused to help him, and he would have gone away without a penny, if I hadn't remembered."

"You mean — the yow?"

"Yes—and I am beginning to find that it enters into every detail of my life. It's a big thing that I'm up against, and I'm almost tempted to own myself beaten," Gaunt said wearily.

"I understand. You are afraid that Lady Mildred——"

"We will not discuss my wife," Gaunt interrupted him curtly. "About this meeting—I suppose that the papers will have a good deal to say in the morning."

"Your intervention was certainly dramatic. You spoke splendidly and I believe that your heart was in what you said. It seems to me that you are a man who essentially loves a fight, and I sha'n't be a bit surprised if you are just as eager to defeat the Belgians as I am. You wouldn't have spoken as you did if you had been animated solely by your vow," Drake said quietly.

"I wonder if you are right," Gaunt remarked musingly. "I always have loved to overcome obstacles and the greater the odds, the keener I was. I believe there is some truth in your suggestion. You evidently know me better than I do myself."

"I believe that there is more good in you than you will allow people to see. The apparent hardness has been a pose that you have produced so long that it has become almost second nature."

"You flatter me, Drake. By the bye, I've something amusing to tell you. You remember the deal in Amantis with Weiss and his crowd. Well, it appears that although the wire was forged there *has* been a discovery of gold, and that the shares have gone up to two pounds. More than that, they're well worth the money. Will you kindly tell me how I stand? First with reference to

Weiss, and secondly with reference to the original sellers of the shares. I don't mean how I stand from the strictly business, but from the moral point of view?" Gaunt asked grimly.

Drake laughed quietly to himself.

"Forgive me. I was only imagining Weiss's state of mind. Has he written to you?" he asked.

"No, but he called when I was out. Do you suggest that I ought to pay him what his share would have been?"

"Certainly not, and I am speaking from the moral point of view. The man was engaged in perpetrating a bare-faced swindle ——"

"To which I was a party," Gaunt interrupted him quietly.

"And I do not think that he ought to benefit. Let him do his worst. I don't suppose that he dare make a fuss," Drake said without noticing what Gaunt had said.

"Very well, I will follow your advice, but I quite anticipate a lively time when Weiss and I do happen to meet. Are you going to turn in?"

"Yes. I am tired, for I found this evening rather exciting. By the bye, my brother Lindsay arrives to-morrow from West Africa, and I intended meeting him, unless you particularly want me."

"I didn't know you had a brother on the coast. What is he doing there?" Gaunt asked with interest.

"He's a captain in the West African Frontier Force."

"Why not bring him to stay here? There's plenty of room, and he can have as much freedom as if he were at an hotel."

"That's uncommonly good of you. I should like it above all things. Good-night."

"I am glad that you are satisfied with my performance this evening. Good-night," Gaunt answered grimly.

Drake took the outstretched hand, and the two men looked at one another steadily, and there was a mutual liking in their eyes.

Alone, Gaunt began to pace restlessly to and fro. Even while he had been addressing the meeting his thoughts were with Lady Mildred, and now a great fear was clutching at his heart. Had God given him his wife's life only to withhold her love for which he longed with every fibre of his being?

Up-stairs in her room, Lady Mildred was sobbing piteously. Since the days of her childhood tears had been an unknown luxury, but now she was stirred to the very depths.

"I hate him," she sobbed forth passionately.

It was late in the morning when she went down-stairs and proceeded at once to the library. John Gaunt rose when she entered, and uttered a cry of amazement, for her face was very white and dark shadows encircled her eyes.

"What is the matter, dear? Are you ill?" he asked anxiously.

"No—only sick in mind," she answered wearily. "Have patience with me, John, for I have a great deal to say to you, and you may not understand me, for I do not think that I understand myself."

"Sit down," he said quietly, and wheeled an armchair nearer to the fire. "What has happened?" he asked anxiously.

"I will try to explain. I seem to have awakened



from a dream and my whole outlook on life has changed," she said, as though she was addressing herself.

"Since when?" he asked hoarsely.

"Since last night. As I look at the past I can see nothing but abject selfishness. As a girl my one thought was of my own comfort. I always loved the good things of this life — I suppose I had a conscience somewhere, but it never troubled me. When you appeared, I was utterly sick of poverty, and I was glad that you seemed to care for me. Almost from the first I made up my mind to be your wife. I didn't care for you very much, but still I disliked you rather less than most of the fools who surrounded me. When you asked me to marry you my eyes were just a little bit opened, but still I could not see clearly. We were good friends always, and when the baby came — then — I think it must have been the dream that made me see that I was beginning to care for you. And I was very glad."

Gaunt's breath came quickly, and his hand stretched out towards her, but she shook her head when she saw the mad longing in his eyes.

"But I was not sure. Last night something compelled me to go with you to that dreadful meeting — perhaps it was Fate. All my life the idea of physical suffering has been repugnant to me. To see an animal in pain was torture. You are surprised at this, John, but you know very little of me. One of the strictest rules of the training of women of our class is that to show the slightest sign of one's feeling is bad form. We are taught to batten down our real thoughts, and only let the world see what it will find agreeable. And therefore we are all frauds,"

She turned her face towards him and to his amazement there were tears in her eyes.

"Of course I had read of the Congo, and what had gone on there, but it never made much impression on my mind—I suppose because I did not really understand. But as I listened to those who spoke last night, the whole ghastly tragedy was revealed to me, but still I did not connect you with the monsters who were responsible for it."

She broke off and gave a little sob.

"There was that missionary who told of the baby whose hands had been chopped off, and for one mad moment I thought of what I should have suffered if it had been my own child. Then came the succession of horrors, of brutality, of torturings, of murder, of the deliberate mutilations, and still I did not remember. I could only think of the millions who are in the Congo—that even at the present moment some fresh outrage might be going on."

She covered her face with her hands, and her body trembled slightly. Gaunt stared at her in amazement, for this was a humor of which he had not thought her capable. What was she going to say to him? Again fear held him in its grip.

"And then you rose from your seat. Like a flash it was revealed to me that you—that my husband was one of the criminals, who had coined gold by this devilish torturing of the natives."

"Mildred, you do not know what you are saying," he cried passionately.

"As in a dream I listened to you, and was amazed that you dared face the people and deliberately own

to them that you were a murderer," she said vehemently.

"You are mad," he said hoarsely.

"What are you but a murderer? You have benefited by the slaying of helpless people. You were in the country and did not raise a hand to prevent it. I listened to your shameful avowal — and I remembered that you were my husband," she said dully.

"I think that you cannot have recovered from your illness. Had you not better lie down?" he said quickly.

"But that was not the worst. Not only were you my husband, but you were the father of my child. When the little one comes to years of understanding he will hear of the way that his father made his money — he will bear a name that is tainted," she cried passionately.

Gaunt's face had grown very white, and he faced her sternly.

"Mildred, is it not rather late in the day to have these ideas? When I asked you to be my wife, you were aware of my reputation, and you made no objection," he said coldly.

"I was a blind fool. I had no idea what it really meant, and in those days I do not think I should have greatly cared even if I had known."

"What has caused this change?"

"I found out a few hours ago — I found out that I loved you."

Her voice scarcely rose above a whisper, and her eyes were turned away.

"You love me. Thank God!" he cried passionately, and he stretched out his arms.

"Yes. I love you," she cried dully.

"Then nothing else matters."

She had risen to her feet and he drew nearer to her, but she raised her hand.

"Don't touch me," she cried vehemently.

"I don't understand you, Mildred. You tell me that you love me, and yet ——"

"There is blood on your hands. I love you, but instead of being my glory it is my shame," she said brokenly.

"You are melodramatic, and that is not usual in you. I wish you would tell me exactly what you do mean," he cried impatiently.

"My meaning is clear. I have tried to explain, and ——"

Gaunt had been controlling himself by a great effort, but his passion cast off all bonds and he seized her in his arms. His lips sought hers and he kissed her passionately, not once but many times, in spite of her struggles to free herself from his embrace.

"You love me and I tell you that nothing else matters. I am not worse than other men," he cried earnestly.

"Then God pity other men," she answered pantingly.

She had drawn away from him, and there was anger in her eyes.

"You dare kiss me after what I have said. Do you think that I am a young girl to be swayed by a caress?"

"You are a fool, and don't know when you're well off," he said savagely.

And there followed silence, save for the sound of Lady Mildred's quick breathing.

"Forgive me, dear. I forgot myself for the moment.



Let us talk the wretched business over quietly, and I think that I can convince you that you are making a great fuss about nothing," he said quietly.

"I am willing to listen to you, but don't touch me again, please. If you do I shall hate you."

He gave her a look that was full of appeal, and when her face did not soften, a sigh escaped him. But now he had recovered himself and was determined not to make another false move. She had told him that she loved him. With that in his favor he must win in the end, and could afford to be patient.

"Sit down, dear, and let us talk the thing over sensibly. You don't mind if I smoke?"

As he spoke he took a cigar and spent a long time in preparing it for smoking.

"I was quite a lad when I went to the Congo, and it is not fair to hold me responsible for what went on in the country. On my honor, I have never been guilty of the torturing of a native," he said earnestly.

"But still, the torturing was going on all around you, and you made no effort to prevent it."

"My efforts would have been useless. In those days I had no power," he protested.

"Then as a decent man, you should have left the country, and sought a cleaner way of making money. You admit that you remained there for years. Did you never feel ashamed?"

"You did not hear all I said last night," he said quietly.

"No. If I had stayed much longer I should have broken down. I had no wish to make a public exhibition of myself."

Now she had recovered herself and spoke in her usual manner.

"I stated that I would use my money to help the natives, and I intend to do so."

"Then you admit that my accusations are just?" she said quickly.

"Yes. I have always known that my conduct was infamous. But I intended to make money."

"Now that you have tardily repented, you think that you will earn salvation by spending some of your ill-gotten gold," she cried contemptuously.

"I am not quite sure that I have repented," he answered grimly.

"Then why did you speak as you did? You must have known the sensation it would make. The papers are full of it, and you have earned a very unenviable notoriety. Did you remember that this notoriety would reflect upon your wife and child? But answer my question. If not for repentance, then why did you speak?" she asked peremptorily.

"I don't think I will answer that question."

"Then I must ask Mr. Drake. Of course, I can see that he has had a hand in it."

"I don't think Drake will give you much information," he said impatiently.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"No. I should like to know how we stand?"

"I have told you and can say no more," she answered wearily.

"You have told me that you love me—but in the next breath you tell me not to touch you. I should like something definite."

"Then you must give me time. I said that I loved you but I am not sure that it is true. When I remember, I feel that I loathe you."

"I think I prefer loathing to indifference. Still, your request is not unreasonable and I am willing to give you time.

"Thank you—and in the meantime?" she asked nervously.

"In the meantime it shall be just as you wish. One question more. If I were to take steps—practical steps to help the natives, would that count in my favor?"

"Yes. But what can you do?" she asked wonderingly.

"Now that I have this additional motive, I may find a means. Mildred, dear, you have shown me an unsuspected side of your nature, but I think I am glad."

"Be patient with me, John. I think I am only just beginning to find out myself, and it is a painful experience," she said with a wistful smile.

She had moved towards the door, and he followed quickly after her, took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"I shall win. I shall win," he said with grim determination.

Lady Mildred went straight to the nursery and sat down by the cot where the child was sleeping. In speaking to her husband she had been absolutely frank, and now, when she thought over what she had said, she was amazed at herself. For a long time she sat there and wondered what John would do.

The child awoke and she took it in her arms, finding strange comfort to feel it there.

"Yes, baby mine. You have taught me a great deal,

and I am very grateful to you, dear," she whispered, and kissed it tenderly.

Lunch was eaten alone, and she remained in her own rooms all the afternoon. Every now and then she would find herself wondering what her husband was doing.

When she had ordered tea to be brought to her, the door opened, and Lady Ethel entered, a look of excitement on her face.

"What has happened between you and John?" she cried to Lady Mildred.

"What do you mean? Why do you ask the question?"

"I have just passed the library. The door was open. John and Mr. Drake and another gentleman were talking. I heard John say in a loud voice: 'Yes. By Heaven I will go back to the Congo.' And then I came away, for I do not like to listen to what is not intended for my ears. Is John really going back to that dreadful country?" Lady Ethel asked anxiously.

Lady Mildred rose to her feet, and her face worked painfully.

"Should it be true?" she muttered hoarsely.



## CHAPTER XIII

**J**OHAN GAUNT was deeply moved by the knowledge that his wife loved him, and he felt that half the battle was over; but upon carefully thinking over what she had said, his confidence vanished, for he realized that she possessed a will as strong as his own, and that many a weary day might pass before she would give herself to him.

At first he was inclined to accuse her of inconsistency for he had never judged her to be a good woman in the ordinary sense of the word. But she had spoken with such feeling that he could not doubt that she was honest in her loathing of his past.

It is a curious trait in such men as Gaunt that they can love if they do not respect the object of their affections, and he had never been blind to his wife's faults. Now he found it necessary to regard her from a different point of view and he was not dissatisfied that this should be so. So long as there had been no child, he had been content that she should think of nothing save her present comfort and enjoyment, but now he was glad that the mother of his son had shown that she could rise above such considerations.

Soon there came the memory of her scathing words, and he began to pace restlessly to and fro. Yes — her accusations were just, and slowly the scales fell from his

eyes and he saw his actions in their true light. It is not a pleasant moment in a man's life when he first understands that his character is base, but to a few comes this revelation of self.

Gaunt was not given to analyzing his own character, but for a long time he sat and thought over the many discreditable actions of which he had been guilty. True, there were no mean and petty sins, for if he had deliberately done wrong it had been with the idea of reaping a substantial benefit.

It was strange that he should now be thinking of himself with something akin to contempt, but soon the mood changed and he concentrated all his brains upon devising some plan of winning his wife. For the moment all memory of his vow had vanished, and it was solely with the idea of pleasing Lady Mildred that he now sought a scheme to benefit the natives of the Congo.

He idly took up one of the daily papers that were spread out on the table and in great staring head-lines read of the meeting of the previous evening. The comments were varied, and in many cases not too favorable to himself, but he passed them by with a grim smile.

The *Daily Comet* was particularly virulent: "The finishing touch to an hysterical meeting was put by the notorious millionaire John Gaunt. With calm effrontery he admitted that he was a participator in the alleged outrages and with his tongue in his cheek promised to give his wealth and apply his brains to the amelioration of the lot of the natives of the Congo. Apparently his offer was received with acclamation, and it is strange

indeed that a meeting, which consisted chiefly of divines of various creeds, should welcome into its fold a man with Gaunt's record. If rumor speaks truly, the Congo is not the worst part of the millionaire's past. With due respect for the law of libel, we suggest that his hands are not too clean with respect to some of his numerous company promotions. We have heard a story with reference to a deal in Amanti shares, to which we may have occasion to refer more particularly at a future date. In the meantime we intend to follow closely John Gaunt's footsteps in the path of unctuous righteousness."

The paper fluttered to the ground and Gaunt did not move for a few moments, but there was a curious smile on his face. Ahead he could see a fight, and he was ready for the fray.

There was a knock at the door, and he turned round to see Drake enter followed by a tall man whose tanned skin spoke of long residence in a tropical climate.

"This is my brother Lindsay," Drake said by way of introduction.

"I am grateful for your invitation, sir," Lindsay Drake said, "and gladly accept it. It will enable me to see so much more of my brother."

"I hope you will make yourself at home," Gaunt answered, and then took up the *Daily Comet* which he handed to Edward Drake. "Have you read this?" he asked quietly.

Gaunt went to a cabinet and brought out a box of cigars, which he handed to the soldier.

"So you have just come back from the coast. You are looking remarkably fit," he remarked pleasantly.

"Yes. I got back this morning. My brother has been telling me that you were in the Congo Free State for some time. A pretty wretched country, I should think, but then, no part of West Africa is very comfortable," Captain Drake answered, with a frank smile.

The brothers were remarkably alike and were both eminently clean-looking men whom one would trust and like instinctively.

"A dastardly article," Edward Drake cried indignantly, and threw down the paper. "What is the meaning of it? The *Comet* is generally fair, in spite of its Yankee methods."

"It is easily explained, but I shall probably shock you, for we English people pride ourselves upon the honesty of our press. And we are not far wrong, although they have played the game of the Belgians for years past. When King Leopold was alive he spent a portion of his revenue from the Congo in subsidizing the press. In the United States he was more successful than in this country, for here it is impossible to buy the policy of a newspaper. That is in cash—a peerage is not considered a bribe. So the King went to work in his usual diplomatic way. Although the papers are incorruptible, their correspondents are more pliable. Look back and you will remember how few cables have come from Belgium relating to the Congo, and the reason is not far to seek. Many men have come from the Congo with a sheaf of horrors with which they were about to startle Europe—but the horrors have never been made public. The King had a persuasive tongue, he was free with his money, and, *voilà tout*."



"It seems incredible," Drake cried vehemently.

"But it is none the less true. Read Mark Twain's famous 'Soliloquy of King Leopold.' Never has such an indictment been penned, and the ways of the Belgian press bureau are proved up to the hilt. Now that the King is dead those upon whom his mantle has fallen are pursuing the same course. Not many hours will pass before they will turn their attention to me. Every possible means will be tried to silence me, by bribes, and threats. I hope this doesn't bore you?" Gaunt said suddenly turning to Captain Drake.

"On the contrary I am deeply interested. I have had some experience of the Belgian swine myself. Their methods are even worse than the Germans in Southwest Africa, and *their* methods are pretty ghastly," the latter said quietly.

"I wonder if you would mind taking my brother into your confidence. I mean, with reference to our plans for the future," Edward Drake added hastily, when he saw a frown appear on Gaunt's face.

"Not at all. His knowledge of West Africa may be useful," Gaunt answered readily.

For the moment he had imagined that Drake meant to tell the captain of his vow and he had a great objection to any one having knowledge of it.

"I read your speech when I was coming up from Plymouth, and I may say that I admire you for your pluck," Captain Drake said with quiet enthusiasm.

Gaunt flushed at the praise for he felt that he was little deserving of it.

"I am prepared to enter heart and soul into your

plans," the captain continued; "I have lived among the natives and have always found them decent. I am not one who considers the nigger but little better than the brute. True, their intelligence is not very great, but they can be capable of great loyalty and have a keen sense of gratitude. There isn't a better fighting man in the world than the properly trained Haussa. Will you not tell me something of your intentions?"

Gaunt rose from his chair and an expression of great gravity came into his face.

"Since last night, many schemes have come into my mind, but so far none of them have been quite feasible. I think it is a hopeless task to try to change the present conditions in the Congo by peaceful methods, although it is my intention to see the foreign secretary at an early date. Should he fail me, as I fully anticipate, I have wondered if it would not be possible for us to try force?"

"What do you mean?" Edward Drake cried excitedly.

"I presume that you would consider us morally justified if, in endeavoring to turn the Belgians out of the Congo, bloodshed should ensue?" Gaunt asked quietly.

"Please explain yourself," Edward Drake cried in wonder.

"Perhaps it is rather a mad idea, but it may be practicable. You are probably aware that the Belgians have no navy. That being so a single cruiser would give us command of the sea, so far as they are concerned. There are many war-ships nearing completion in the British dockyards for foreign countries — princi-

pally for the South American Republics. For a financial consideration one of these republics might be willing to lease me a cruiser for a few months. If we could safely get her away and proceeded to the mouth of the Congo, we should be masters of the situation. No rubber could leave the Free State, and all trade would be at a standstill. Of course, we couldn't expect to conquer the country by force, for we shouldn't have sufficient men, but I think England would be pretty certain to intervene if we gave her the lead."

Edward Drake stared at Gaunt in utter amazement, for he was astounded at the audacity of the scheme.

"Yes. By Heaven! I will go back to the Congo myself," Gaunt said with grim determination. "Now, Drake, you're my conscience and what have you to say about the morality of the idea? You must remember that the mouth of the Congo is fortified and fighting might ensue."

Edward Drake's face was ablaze with excitement and his likeness to his brother was accentuated.

"I think that any means would be justified to put an end to this abominable traffic in human lives," he said with great earnestness.

"Mr. Gaunt, I'm with you heart and soul," the captain said gravely, but his eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"It is a big thing and will require careful consideration. Let us take a day or two to think it over, and then we can have a long talk. Captain Drake, I am glad that you are with us for I think that you can be of great assistance. Drake, will you introduce your brother



to my wife and Lady Ethel? You will find them upstairs. I am going into the City."

The brothers stood and watched him leave the room.

"That's a man," Captain Drake said with quiet enthusiasm.



## CHAPTER XIV

**I**N the Palm Garden of the Carlton Hotel sat a party of four, two of whom were in the highest spirits, while the faces of the remaining pair were extremely grave.

Lady Mildred was next to Edward Drake and they exchanged but few remarks while Captain Drake and Lady Ethel were amusing themselves by exchanging critical comments upon the fashionable crowd who were drinking tea.

"You are very silent," Edward Drake said to John Gaunt's wife, and she turned her eyes full upon him.

"Is it true that my husband is addressing another meeting to-night about the Congo?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes, and I believe that he contemplates further engagements," Drake answered.

"It is evident that you are responsible for this curious change in Mr. Gaunt's mode of life. I wonder if you have considered me at all. You must know that since the big meeting at which I was present my position has not altogether been a pleasant one. Every friend and acquaintance I have met has not hesitated to show their curiosity. Cannot you give me some explanation why all this wretched publicity should be necessary?" she asked quietly.

Lady Mildred had agreed to accompany her sister solely for the purpose of having a quiet talk with Drake,

but as yet she had not dared to ask the question, the answer to which she dreaded to hear. Ever since the previous afternoon when her sister had told her what she had overheard in the library, her mind had been strangely perturbed. Her first impulse had been to run to her husband and ask if it were true that he was going to the Congo, but an unwonted feeling of shyness stayed her.

"Surely you cannot object to Mr. Gaunt's wish to help the natives? His purpose is a noble one and worthy of the admiration of all good women," he answered simply.

"I have never pretended to be a good woman, Mr. Drake. But you have not answered my question. Why is all this publicity necessary?" she persisted.

Drake did not reply, and she smiled faintly when she saw that all his attention was fixed on Lady Ethel and his brother. For an instant he was off his guard, and she read the secret which he had not dared yet to admit to himself.

Edward Drake loved the young girl to whose face animation gave an additional beauty. And he was thinking that she had never showed to him the evident liking she felt for his brother. As he watched them talking eagerly it seemed to him that they might have been friends for years and he uttered a faint sigh.

"I asked you a question," Lady Mildred said pointedly.

"I really beg your pardon. I fear that my thoughts were wandering," he cried hastily.

"Does my husband intend to return to the Congo?" she asked and her voice scarcely rose above a whisper.

Drake was astonished and for a few moments did not reply. It had been easy to guess that the relations between Gaunt and his wife were strained, and he did not know how far the millionaire intended to give Lady Mildred his confidence.

"Don't you think that you should ask your husband?" he suggested quietly.

The reproach was delicately veiled, yet it was none the less present, and she was quick to feel it. In an instant her pride was in arms and when she spoke her voice was very cold.

"I will do so. By the bye, wouldn't it be only kind to give your brother a hint? Captain Drake's admiration is so very open — and Lady Ethel is so very young," she added quickly.

If her intention was to wound, she succeeded only too well, for Drake's face was grimly set. It was revealed to him with overwhelming force that he had given himself unreservedly to the beautiful girl who faced him. At the moment, a reply was impossible, and he struggled fiercely to give no sign of emotion, for he was conscious that Lady Mildred's eyes were fixed keenly upon him; but she relented very quickly.

"Forgive me, Mr. Drake. I should not have said that. I really do not know what is the matter with me this afternoon," she said nervously.

Still Drake did not speak, and he turned away his face from her eyes. It must be remembered that his life had been untouched by the influence of any woman save his mother, and when love comes to such a one, it is apt to sweep everything before it. And he understood that marriage with Lady Ethel was an impossibility. Even

should she care for him — and his blood tingled at the mere idea — how could he offer himself to one who was accustomed to every luxury? His total income would be insufficient to provide her with the clothes that she wore so gracefully.

Yes, Lady Mildred was right, for it was impossible to mistake the look that was in his brother's eyes — a look of simple adoration. Those who spend the greater part of their lives in savage countries, away from their kind, lose all sense of the conventionalities which bind those who stay at home. For twelve months Lindsay Drake had been surrounded by black faces and the mere sight of Lady Ethel's fair beauty had sent him headlong to her feet. It was not his nature to conceal his feelings, and she knew that he was her slave, and that she could do with him as she willed. Every woman must take a delight in the knowledge that she is loved, and Lady Ethel was no exception, for she never imagined that there could be any harm in accepting his worship. But suddenly she chanced to look at Edward Drake, and all the color ebbed from her face, and she stopped in the middle of a sentence.

There ensued one of those strange silences, in which there is a touch of constraint, and the arrival of a lady and gentleman at the next table was a welcome interruption.

"Yes. I was at the meeting, and Gaunt's speech was the most dramatic thing that I ever heard in my life," the man was saying.

"What do you think he did it for — advertisement?" his companion asked.

"No. He is not that kind of man. I've met him



once or twice and have found him a most attractive personality. In fact I am making him the model of one of the characters in my next book. Of course the man's been a bit of a blackguard."

Edward Drake half rose from his chair but Lady Mildred placed her hand on his arm.

"Sit down, please. It is well to hear one's neighbor's opinions," she said, and he realized that she would not go.

"But he is an interesting kind of blackguard. If he had lived a few hundred years ago, he would have been quite a moral character. Just imagine what colossal impudence a man must possess to do as he did. Remember that he was as bad as any of the Belgians in the Congo. He coins a fortune out of the ill-treatment of the natives, and when his pockets are full he stands up and complacently denounces those who are doing as he has done."

"Why do you think that he spoke if not for advertisement?" the lady asked curiously.

"I am puzzled to find a reason. He spoke with such evident sincerity that one might almost imagine that he had been suddenly—what the Salvationists term—'saved.' Of course you know that he married that good-looking woman, Lady Mildred Blythe, and I am wondering what she thinks of it all. Her ladyship is not the sort of person to ——"

"Now I am ready," Lady Mildred said very quietly, and they made their way from the corner.

Edward Drake gave a quick look at the speaker from whom they had been hidden by a group of palms, and recognized a famous novelist who was quick to see his indiscretion, for he ceased to speak, and his face became

deeply flushed. It chanced that he was acquainted by sight with Lady Mildred and he half rose, as though it was his intention to follow and apologize, but quickly subsided into his seat again.

A motor-car was in waiting, and the order was given to return to Park Lane, but to all of them the drive was unpleasant. Lady Mildred stared fixedly through the window and remained silent until they reached home.

"I am going to talk to my husband, but afterwards I should like you to come to my room," she said to Edward Drake and he bowed in reply.

John Gaunt was in the library and he looked up quickly when his wife entered but his face remained grave as he stood waiting for her to speak. It was the first time they had met since their interview of the previous afternoon, and he wondered what had caused her to come.

"Won't you sit down?" he said politely.

In the intervening hours he had been carefully considering his attitude towards his wife and had determined to make no advance until she showed him plainly that it would be welcome to her.

"I can only stay a minute. We've just come from the Carlton. They say that listeners never hear any good of themselves. I've listened to a very candid opinion about you, and I'm a little upset. John, is it quite necessary that you should go on with this Congo business? Couldn't you give up this meeting to-night and take me out to dinner?" she asked nervously.

He looked at her eagerly, but her face was quickly turned away, and he sighed a sigh of utter weariness.

"It is impossible. I must keep my promise. I am

sorry that you have heard anything unpleasant and hope the memory of it will quickly vanish. I have made up my mind to do all that is in my power to help the natives of the Congo, and I am not likely to turn back. I must warn you that the fight is likely to be a severe one, and it is very probable that I shall suffer, for my opponents are not too particular in their methods. If you are to suffer with me, I am deeply sorry, but it cannot be helped," he said gently.

"I wish that I could understand you," she said timidly.

"I wish that I could understand myself," he answered with a smile.

He moved towards the door, but she showed no sign of going.

"Is it true that you are going back to that wretched country?" she asked desperately.

John Gaunt was surprised at the question, and did not answer at once.

"If it is necessary, I shall go. But why do you ask? Has Drake said anything to you?" he exclaimed suspiciously.

"Nothing. Doesn't it strike you that all this is rather hard upon me? Surely a wife is entitled to her husband's confidence. Ever since baby was born you seem to have changed completely. Why does Mr. Drake live with us? What has he to do with this change?"

It was impossible for him to answer the question without revealing everything, and he was quite determined that his wife should not know of the vow that he had made. What could he say to her?

"I believe that he is a good man, but surely it is not

necessary to have him constantly with you?" she continued nervously.

"I like Drake, and I am greatly indebted to him."

"Won't you give orders to prepare the yacht and let us go away—just you and I—for a long voyage? I think I could be very happy with you—alone," she said in a low voice, but her eyes were full of appeal.

"I should like nothing better in the world but I can't do it," he answered firmly, but he was struggling fiercely with himself to subdue the mad desire to take her in his arms and cover her face with kisses.

"Very well," she answered coldly, and left him.



## CHAPTER XV

**G**AUNT'S first impulse was to hasten after his wife and accept the proposal she had made. There could be no doubt that she had offered him all that he was struggling to obtain — her love; and if he had agreed to go away on the yacht, they might live the life of which he had dreamed. To do him justice the temptation, though strong, was but momentary, for he quickly remembered that to leave England at the present moment would be to break the vow that he had made.

“No. I will win her and yet be honest to myself,” he said grimly.

The fever of fighting had entered into his blood, and he was longing to come to close quarters with the enemy. In fact he was looking forward to the meeting at which he was to be the chief speaker, and was determined that he would not mince matters, but would state the truth, brutally and forcibly.

Lady Mildred's complaint was a just one, for blows would be dealt unscrupulously and there was plenty of ammunition for the enemy in his past. It was quite clear to Gaunt that the Congo officials in Brussels would show no mercy, and would use any weapon that came to hand; perhaps it was this knowledge that made him eager for the fray.

The love of a fight was born in the man, and his eyes sparkled as he thought of the coming contest. For the

moment the vow was forgotten and ceased to be the motive that guided him.

Gaunt and Edward Drake dined alone, and the latter spoke but little during the meal.

"Did Lady Mildred tell you of an unfortunate occurrence this afternoon?" he asked at last.

"She mentioned that she had overheard some one make remarks about myself that were the reverse of complimentary. Tell me the details," Gaunt said with a smile, and he listened quietly to Drake's accurate description of what had happened.

"There is a certain amount of truth in what the man said, but I can imagine that my wife was annoyed. I fear that she will have to get used to listening to much worse things than that," Gaunt answered drily.

"It is a pity. Don't you think she might go abroad for a while with Lady Ethel?" Drake suggested nervously.

"She wouldn't go and I think that she would prefer to be in England."

"By the bye, she asked me the reason of the recent change in you, and ——"

"What did you say?" Gaunt interrupted him quickly.

"Nothing. And when she wanted to know if you were going to the Congo, I referred her to you. Don't you think it would be as well to give Lady Mildred your entire confidence? I can see that things are not quite right between you."

"Listen to me, Drake. If we are to remain friends, that is a subject that must never be mentioned between us. I may not be able to manage my own conscience,

but, by Heaven, I'll manage my own domestic affairs," Gaunt cried warmly.

"Forgive me. It was not from any desire to meddle that I spoke. Gaunt, I like you and I like Lady Mildred. When two people are proud, misunderstandings arise easily, and I thought that I might be able to help you both," Drake said gently.

"That's all right. I shouldn't have spoken quite so roughly, but I think you understand. We've just time for a smoke before we start. Come into the library," Gaunt said and placed his hand on Drake's shoulder with an affectionate touch.

Their characters were utterly different, and yet their mutual liking was increasing daily as their knowledge of one another grew.

"I've been thinking over that 'cruiser' idea," Gaunt began when they had lighted their cigars, "and I'm not at all sure that the scheme is not practicable as a last resource. I intend to make inquiries at once, but the difficulty is to do so without attracting attention. Secrecy is essential to success."

"It seems to me that there is a greater chance of making the British government move now that you have started to work. The fact that you are fighting for the natives gives that touch of romance which is necessary to rouse the public's interest."

"There is not much romance about John Gaunt. Come along or we shall be late."

The meeting had been well advertised, and Drake was right in his surmise that Gaunt's personality would attract when the wrongs of the natives failed to do so, for the large hall was packed from floor to ceiling. The

chairman wasted but little time in his opening remarks and quickly called upon Gaunt to speak.

When he rose to his feet and faced them, there was the same look of defiance on his face that had been there at the previous meeting. In simple language he began to tell them of his experiences on the Congo and there was no straining after effect, but soon he began to see that their attention was engrossed by his words, and he spoke with more feeling.

There are many men in the world who are born orators and yet do not know it, and such a man was Gaunt. Until a few days ago he had never addressed a public meeting in his life, save those of his companies, so he had had no opportunity of discovering the powers that lay dormant in him. There is no more exhilarating feeling than that of the speaker who holds a vast multitude in the hollow of his hand, and who can sway them as he pleases, to laughter, or to tears.

And a great hush fell upon the building as with graphic touch he painted the terrible torturings of a nation. And once more Gaunt realized the baseness of the past that he had played in the Congo, so that when he said the last few solemn words he knew himself to be what he really was.

There was no applause, only a painful hush when he resumed his seat; but still his lips moved, and only Drake who was beside him could catch the muttered words.

“By Heaven, I’ll undo the past.”

Then he chanced to look among the crowd and saw an elderly gentleman of aristocratic appearance seated a few rows from the front, whose overcoat was slightly



open, and across his white shirt was the broad ribbon of an order.

"So the Baron has arrived," Gaunt remarked under his breath, and a tense look came into his eyes.

As soon as the meeting was over, they returned to Park Lane and Drake retired to his room, for he was very tired. Gaunt put on a smoking-jacket and settled down comfortably before the fire, but there was an air of expectation on his face and it was not very long before a footman entered and approached his master.

"Baron de Croiseuil wishes to see you, sir," he announced.

"Show him in here," Gaunt replied and then rose to his feet and stood facing the door to await his visitor.

In a short time the footman returned and was immediately followed by the gentleman whom Gaunt had noticed at the meeting.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Baron," Gaunt remarked quietly.

"Not quite unexpected, I think. May I sit down, for I think that our interview is likely to be a long one?"

The Baron spoke English with only a faint trace of an accent, but his manner and appearance were distinctly foreign. Without waiting for Gaunt to answer, he moved an armchair into position into which he sank gracefully.

"May I smoke?" he said as he produced a gold cigarette case. "*Eh bien, mon ami*, I listened to your speech with much interest, and pray allow me to congratulate you upon your eloquence, but the subject matter was deplorable," the Baron said quietly.

"I do not think that your visit is likely to do any

good. Of course I know why you have come to England," Gaunt answered coldly.

"Yes, it is easy to guess. The cabled reports of your speech the other night seemed incredible and so I thought it better to run over to find out the truth myself. *Helas!* It is even worse than we had imagined. May I ask if you have taken leave of your senses?" the Baron asked suavely.

"Have I the appearance of a madman?" Gaunt answered with a harsh laugh. "Baron, you and I know one another pretty well, and it is better that we should be quite frank. I suppose that I am the only man in England that really understands the little game that you people are playing in the Congo. In my public utterances I have definitely stated that I intend to concentrate all my energies upon defeating you. Do you understand?"

"Ah, but that was *blague*, just something to say for a little *réclame* for yourself. As you say, we know one another, and I am quite sure that you are not the man to go against your own interests, especially those of a pecuniary nature," the Baron said smoothly.

"If you think that, then I am afraid that you do not know me. I am perfectly serious, and I shall not rest until your régime in the Congo comes to an end."

"Ah," the Baron ejaculated, and lapsed into silence.

His eyes were fixed on Gaunt's face and he studied him keenly. For some time neither of them spoke, and at last the Baron threw away his half consumed cigarette with an impatient movement.

"It is a thousand pities, for I like you, Gaunt. I knew you as a young man and was one of the first to

recognize your ability. It is a thousand pities," he repeated reflectively.

Still Gaunt did not speak, and now their eyes met, the Baron's cold and menacing.

"You are young and very rash," he continued quietly, "but with your inside knowledge you ought to recognize our power. Already you have done us serious injury, but I am willing to forgive that if you will promise to remain silent in the future. In a few years our task will be accomplished, and——"

"In a few years — when you have drained the Congo dry — when you have killed off the people in thousands, and when the whole country is desolate. Baron, I understand your policy, for, as you say, I have inside knowledge. I repeat that the infamies shall cease," Gaunt said with grim determination.

"May I ask if this is blackmail?"

Gaunt jumped to his feet and stood over the Baron with upraised fist.

"Ah! I forgot that you were a rich man. But if that is not your motive, may I ask why you have turned upon those who were once your friends?" the Baron asked calmly, and he did not appear to notice Gaunt's attitude.

"I think you had better go," Gaunt said in a low voice that was tense with suppressed anger.

"Not until we come to an understanding, *mon ami*; I am going to stay here until I convince you that you must be silent — for your own safety."

Now the suavity had left the Baron's voice and he spoke sharply as he took a collection of documents from his pocket.

"This is your *dossier*, which contains a record of all your actions while you were on the Congo. We often find such things useful in dealing with people who take up the same attitude as yourself. Permit me to remind you of a few incidents. You may find the memory painful, but you bring it on yourself. I wonder if you remember the case of the man Marillier. He was shot — wasn't he, and by ——? Ah! You have turned a little pale. We have a long memory — we who govern the Congo. Murder is a crime that may be punished after many years. Let me remind you of the whole history. You will forgive me if I speak at some length."

The Baron had risen, and the two men faced one another.

"Or shall I remain silent? It only requires your promise," the Baron continued very quietly and there was a smile on his face.

"I defy you!" Gaunt cried hoarsely.

And the Baron no longer smiled.



## CHAPTER XVI

**I**T would have been impossible to choose a more suitable emissary than the Baron de Croiseuil for the task of dealing with John Gaunt, for he was an astute diplomatist, and entirely devoid of scruples. During the last few years there had grown up in Belgium a group of men whose prosperity was solely due to the Congo. Many of them had spent varying periods of time in that country, and had returned without the sense of honor which they may once have possessed.

When Gaunt first went to West Africa, the Baron was a high official of the Free State, and he was mainly responsible for the carrying out of the late King's decree that rubber must be got, and that the method of obtaining it need not be considered. It was a congenial task, for as he made money for his master, so did he line his own pockets, and the time came when he could return to Belgium a man of wealth, and covered with the honors that the King delighted to confer upon those who had succeeded in sending to him the millions which he needed for the pursuit of his life of vice.

But when Baron de Croiseuil arrived home he was not allowed to remain idle for long, and his services were utilized to stifle the cry for reform that was just beginning to be heard in England, and the United States, and right well did he carry out the duties.

The death of the King had come at an opportune mo-

ment, for it would give the Belgian rule of the Congo a fresh lease of life, and there would be no necessity to change their methods, for it would be a simple matter to answer criticisms by saying that, now there was a new king, conditions would be improved, provided that time was allowed to bring about the necessary reforms. And all the time there was no intention to relax the rigor of their rule, but rather to force the natives to work the harder, so that the harvest might be garnered, before Europe awoke to the fact that it had been cleverly hoodwinked.

All was peace and contentment in Brussels, for each ship brought its increasing cargo of rubber and the demand for reform had almost ceased; until the big meeting took place in which Gaunt had made so dramatic an appearance.

The Baron immediately realized the seriousness of the situation, for naturally the words of a man, who had been one of the first to exploit the Congo, would carry great weight. A hurried meeting took place in Brussels, and as a consequence De Croiseuil came to England with an entirely free hand, and practically an unlimited purse.

It was with great interest that he had attended the meeting, and his amazement was great when he listened to Gaunt's speech.

"He speaks like an honest man," had been his thought.

And so he had entered the library without any confidence that he could succeed in influencing John Gaunt, but he was determined to leave no stone unturned.

"You can do your worst. I defy you," Gaunt repeated harshly.

There was an evil light in the Baron's eyes, but he spoke calmly and slowly, pronouncing each word with great distinctness.

"I think that you will change your decision, *mon ami*. If not for your own sake, for your wife's. May I suggest that you do not enjoy the best of reputations in your own country. You have made many enemies, who will be only too glad to seize any opportunity of doing you an injury, and there are many vulnerable places in your armor. It may be necessary that I should join hands with your enemies, and one in particular. By a happy chance I know Mr. Julian Weiss; we have had business deals together, and he is a man who never forgets an injury. Forgive me, Gaunt. This conversation is extremely unpleasant to me personally, and I would gladly drop it if you would only say one little word."

"I have given you my answer," Gaunt said gravely.

"Still, I do not despair of making you change your mind. This little *dossier* contains other details of your life in the Congo. Of course it is a savage country, and one doesn't expect our domestic fireside morals to prevail, but ——"

He stopped and shrugged his shoulders expressively, while his face bore a deprecating smile.

"Lady Mildred is a charming woman, and I am proud to number her among my acquaintances. I propose to cultivate my acquaintanceship with her. It would be deplorable if I am compelled to let her know something of the kind of life you led in the Free State."

Gaunt's face had grown very white, and he required all his strength of will to keep back a flow of contemptuous words.

"My patience is exhausted, and I think ——"

He ceased speaking and turned round quickly, for the door had opened.

"I am sorry to disturb you. I thought you were alone," Edward Drake, for it was he who entered, said apologetically.

"Don't go away, Drake, for I should like to introduce you to the Baron de Croiseuil, whose name you probably know," John said quietly.

The Baron bowed, and Drake returned the salutation, but his manner was frigid, for he was only too well acquainted with the part that this smiling Belgian had played in the Congo.

"The Baron has come to England to try and silence me and he has told me pretty plainly what the consequences will be if I refuse to be silenced," John Gaunt said grimly.

"I think it would be wiser that our business should not be discussed before a third party. This gentleman has the air of a priest, and I will leave him to give you good advice. *Bon soir, messieurs.*"

He bowed very politely, and walked to the door.

"I will give you till the morning for consideration. I am staying at the Ritz, and you will find me there till midday."

The Baron smiled pleasantly, and it was not until he had entered the motor-car that was awaiting him, that he permitted the mask to fall from his face. It was now evident that all his resources would be needed to compel Gaunt to hold his tongue, and he was not at all sure that he would ultimately succeed. But he was an astute judge of human nature, and rather imagined that Gaunt's



one weak spot lay on his wife, and so he determined to turn his attention to Lady Mildred.

In the hall of the Ritz Hotel he found a gentleman waiting him, who rose to greet him.

"Good-evening, Sherren. I am sorry to be late, but it was unavoidable. Will you come up to my sitting-room?" the Baron said politely.

Charles Sherren was an insignificant little man who would have been quite unnoticeable had it not been for his eyes, which were remarkably intelligent. Well known in Fleet Street, but unattached to any newspaper, he was reported to make a good income, for he had been successful in one or two brilliant journalistic coups, that had brought him into prominence. An accomplished linguist, no one knew his real nationality, although many called him a Jew, a statement which he vigorously resented, in spite of his rather Semitic type of features.

To the Baron he had always proved a reliable tool, and had carried out the delicate instructions he was wont to receive with great skill. Sherren was responsible for the many reassuring statements that had appeared in the papers concerning the state of affairs in the Congo, and it was owing to his adroitness that editors had never suspected that their papers were being used by the Congo Press Bureau. In fact his name had never been publicly connected with the Free State, and on that account his services were likely to prove of all the greater value.

"I have just come from Gaunt," the Baron remarked, when they were seated in his room.

"Were you successful?" Sherren asked eagerly.

"Quite the reverse, and now I shall require you to carry out my little programme. As a matter of fact I have given him till twelve o'clock to-morrow to climb down, but I have little hope that he will do so. I want you to understand that this man must be crushed at once, for he is doing us incalculable harm. It requires but an entente between England and Germany to cause the Powers to intervene. In spite of all our efforts, reports continue to come from the Congo, and if this campaign is continued, the British people may take it into their stupid heads to run riot as they did in the case of the Armenian atrocities. It needs but another Gladstone to rouse them, and this man Gaunt is a born orator. In fact I must admit that I myself was rather moved by what he said to-night," the Baron wound up cynically.

"I cannot rush the matter. It is a difficult business to use the newspapers for private interests, and the greatest tact is necessary. Fortunately for us, Gaunt's financial reputation is none of the best, and I know one or two people who are anxious to get at him," Sherren said reflectively.

"Particularly Julian Weiss," the Baron said significantly.

"Yes, over their Amanti deal. But unfortunately Weiss is equally involved with Gaunt. In fact I think that he was the prime mover in the swindle. The man who forged the cable is on his way back to England, and arrives in a day or two: I will see him, and it may be possible to bring the matter up."

"There is no necessity to do that. It will be sufficient to place me in a position to threaten Gaunt. I only want the evidence," De Croiseuil said quickly.

"I will do my best to get it, but it may prove costly."

"*Carte blanche*," the Baron replied laconically.

"That will certainly make things easier. But I fear that you have a difficult task before you, for Gaunt is the very devil. I know, for I tried a little bout with him once upon a time and I came off second best," Sherren remarked with a rueful smile.

"Yes, he is a strong man, but so am I."

"May I ask what you intend to do if threats are of no avail?"

"Carry out the threats and blacken his character in every way, for that will naturally discount the value of what he says. The public are not yet convinced that the man is honest in what he is doing." The Baron paused for a moment, and then continued reflectively, "I wonder if it would be possible to accuse him of blackmail. It might be believed that he was taking this line to force money out of us."

"But Gaunt is a millionaire, and such a charge would rebound upon yourself."

"I see what you mean, and it is a card that I must keep in reserve for it is a risky one to play. By the bye, have you any idea of the relations which exist between Gaunt and his wife? What does gossip say?" the Baron asked casually.

"That she married him for his money. As to Gaunt, I have heard that he acted like a madman when it was thought that his wife would die. I can't tell you more than that."

"Lady Mildred gave me the impression of being a very proud woman. I wonder if she has much influence with her husband?"

"It is hard to say," Sherren said doubtfully.

"But I should imagine that she would loathe the idea of any scandal. And he is in love with her, you say? Well, I cannot decry his taste, for she is very beautiful, but cold — cold. Ah, these English women, I can't understand them. To be loved by them is bliss, but to love — that is another matter."

And the Baron was supposed to have a very complete knowledge of the feminine sex, if rumor spoke truly. He sighed wearily as he lighted another cigarette.

"Start work on the lines I have suggested, and come to see me to-morrow night. Until then you are to do nothing definite. Good-night."

Sherren held out his hand which the Baron took for just a moment, and then left.

"The man is a little reptile but he is useful," De Croiseuil remarked, and then he took a handkerchief from his pocket with which he carefully wiped the hand that had touched Sherren.

"I wonder what is Gaunt's motive?" he said aloud, and when he fell asleep, he had found no answer to the question.



## CHAPTER XVII

LUNCH had been served in Lady Mildred's own sitting-room, for she was reluctant to meet her husband until she saw her way more clearly. It was an unusual state of mind, this indecision and rapid change of feeling, for at one moment she felt that the only thing that mattered was the love of her husband, and then she would remember that terrible evening of the Congo meeting, when he had spoken words that had caused her to turn from him with loathing.

From the day of their engagement she had realized that there were hidden depths in his character, and often she was conscious of a fear of him that disturbed her strangely. That morning she had read in the paper an account of the speech which he had made on the previous evening, and it was evident that he was in deadly earnest in his intention to continue the crusade. And had she not encouraged him? Yes, and almost immediately afterwards implored him to give it up and take her away in the yacht. His motive perplexed her; it was difficult to imagine that his whole character could have been revolutionized so suddenly.

"I believe it is through the influence of Mr. Drake, and I hate him for it," she said vindictively.

Her reverie was disturbed by the entrance of her sister.

"John wants to know if you are unwell," Lady Ethel stated and sat down although she saw that her presence was unwelcome.

"I am not ill, but I wished to be alone," Lady Mildred answered coldly.

She was conscious that her sister was regarding her with a curious direct look, and the color came to her cheeks.

"Does that remark apply to me? If so I will go, for Captain Drake wants me to play a game of billiards," Lady Ethel answered quietly.

"You may stay," was the impatient answer.

"Thank you; and now I will exercise a sisterly privilege and give you a little plain talk. I am growing very fond of John, and I must confess that I am rather sorry for him. It appears to me that you are playing rather a dangerous game with him. The poor man is madly in love with you, but I think that he has just about reached the end of his patience. I wonder if you would mind telling me if you really care for him — or —"

"I think that is rather beyond even a sisterly privilege," Lady Mildred answered distantly. "Wouldn't it be wiser to pay a little more attention to your own affairs, and leave me to manage my own? There are two men who are madly in love with you, and you flirt with them outrageously. Yet you tell *me* that I am playing a dangerous game."

"I suppose you mean Mr. Drake and his brother?" Lady Ethel replied calmly. "I quite admit that I have flirted with Captain Drake, but as to the parson —"

"Well?"

"Parsons aren't exactly in my line," she continued recklessly. "I think Captain Drake is charming, so refreshing after all the stupid people that one meets every day."

"Doubtless he is charming, but very poor."

"And what of that?" Lady Ethel asked defiantly.

"Nothing, unless you mean to marry him. You are like myself, hardly the kind of woman to live in comparative poverty. Of course John would make a good settlement, when you ——"

"John can wait till he is asked. I certainly should never think of accepting anything from a man who is being treated so badly by my sister."

"Ethel, you are impertinent," Lady Mildred replied angrily.

"Perhaps so, but I was only paying you back in your own coin. But don't let us quarrel, dear. I can see that John is utterly miserable, and you don't strike me as being a very happy woman. Ah, here is 'King Baby.' Give him to me, nurse," Lady Ethel cried eagerly and held out her arms.

The nurse retired, and Lady Mildred watched her sister as she held the child in her arms, crooning the while a lullaby.

"Mildred, you ought to be the happiest woman in the world. You've a husband who adores you, and this mite of humanity. I would give my soul to have such a wee little thing clutching at me and knowing that it was mine," Lady Ethel said impulsively.

"You are right, dear. I ought to be happy, yet I am utterly miserable. Give me the baby."

And if the fashionable world could have seen Lady Mildred take the child in her arms with the love-light of a mother in her eyes, they would have wondered greatly.

Tears glistened on her lashes, and her bosom rose and fell quickly. She was crying quietly and could have

given no reason why she wept, for knowledge had not yet come. But Lady Ethel knew, and would have spoken but instinct bade her keep silent ; so she crossed over, and gently kissed her sister.

"Let us send for nurse to take baby and we will go down-stairs. They are all in the library," she said gently, and Lady Mildred did not resist.

They walked arm in arm down the broad staircase, and Lady Ethel whispered earnestly.

"Dearest, be yourself to John. Let him see what is in your heart and all will be right. I am much younger than you, but I think that I am wiser ; for I have learned that there is only one thing in the world that matters — love," she said softly.

"Do you care for Captain Drake?"

But Lady Ethel only smiled, yet there was a flush on her face when they entered the library.

"Where is Mr. Gaunt?" she asked quickly.

"He has gone into the City and won't be back until dinner time," Edward Drake answered.

"Won't you come and play the promised game of billiards?" his brother asked eagerly.

"Yes, and Mr. Drake can mark for us. Come along, Mildred," Lady Ethel cried peremptorily, and her sister followed obediently.

And the room rang with merry laughter, but Edward Drake was very quiet, only now and then exchanging a remark with Lady Mildred. He watched his brother and Lady Ethel, and it seemed to him that they might have been made for one another, with their good looks and high spirits. Yes, there was jealousy in his heart, but he had thrust it down with all his strength, and



believed that he would rejoice in his brother's happiness. Not for a moment did he imagine that this happy girl could so encourage Lindsay's attentions if she did not care for him. Unworldly, it did not occur to him that lack of money might prove to be an unsurmountable obstacle to *their* marriage. Their family was as good as any in the land—sound stock, descending from the Francis Drake that had made the land ring with his fame in the days of the Armada.

And yet he loved Lady Ethel with all the strength and passion of the reserved man who conceals his feelings. A faint sigh escaped him, and Lady Mildred looked up; but she made no remark when she saw the expression in his eyes as they eagerly followed her sister.

A footman entered and approached Lady Mildred.

"Baron de Croiseuil wishes to see your ladyship," he announced.

Lady Mildred uttered an exclamation of surprise as she rose from her seat.

"I did not know that he was in England. I wonder what he wants? Take him to the drawing-room, James," she said and walked towards the door.

But Edward Drake interrupted her quickly.

"Please let me see the Baron for you," he said nervously.

She stared at him in astonishment, for she deemed his request an impertinence.

"I will see him myself. Some time ago I knew him rather well," she answered coldly.

"Please let me see him, Lady Mildred. Perhaps I can guess why he has come and ——"

"Pray finish what you have to say," she cried when he hesitated.

"And I think that it would be wiser if I went to him. I speak as your husband's friend," he cried imploringly.

"You speak very strangely, Mr. Drake. Please let me pass."

He realized that it was useless to insist further, and uttering an exclamation of disappointment, drew back. If Edward Drake had had a greater knowledge of the feminine character, he would have understood that he had taken the very course to make Lady Mildred see the Baron, for he had succeeded in arousing her curiosity.

The Baron was already in the drawing-room, and hastened forward to greet her, a pleasant smile on his face.

"It is a pleasure to meet you once more, Lady Mildred. It has always been a great regret that I was not able to be present at your marriage, especially as Mr. Gaunt was once a great friend of mine," he said effusively.

"I was not aware of the friendship," she answered quietly.

"Yes. In the days when we were in the Congo. In fact, I was one of the first to meet your husband when he arrived, and I think I helped him to success."

"My husband does not talk much to me about those days."

"It is a pity that he does not carry out the same rule with regard to the rest of the world. Of course you know of these speeches he has been making?" the Baron remarked casually.

"I was present at the first of them. Now I think I understand the reason of your call. It was not entirely for the pleasure of seeing me," she said quickly.

"You are right, Lady Mildred, but it was from a

friendly feeling towards yourself. I have very pleasant recollections of our former friendship."

"Our relations scarcely amounted to friendship," she interrupted him.

"That is an unkind remark, but I forgive it. Still, my feelings towards you are those of a friend. *Helas!* they would have been different had I been a younger man."

She flushed angrily, for compliments she detested, but she remained silent.

"I have called to see if it is not possible to prevent a state of affairs from arising that will be extremely distasteful to you."

"You are very kind. But please explain."

"You know that my interests are closely bound up with the Congo? The speeches that your husband is making are injuring my interests, and they must stop immediately. If they do not, I fear that Mr. Gaunt and incidentally yourself will suffer. I implore you to use all your influence with him, Lady Mildred," he said earnestly.

"In what way will my husband suffer?" she asked calmly, but there was an angry light in her eyes that he did not perceive.

"It is a delicate matter, and I hate even to hint at it; but it is for your sake, and I will only say that there are many things in your husband's past that will not bear the light of day. For my part I should do my best to keep them secret, but unfortunately there are others."

Again that expressive shrug of the shoulders.

Lady Mildred crossed the room and pressed the button of the bell.

"It is for your sake, Lady Mildred, and ——"

The footman came in and Lady Mildred turned to him.

"Please show this gentleman from the house, and in the future I am not at home to him."

As she spoke she moved away, and her face was eloquent of contempt.

The Baron hesitated and then, with a final shrug, left the room without saying another word, for he recognized that he was defeated.



## CHAPTER XVIII

**I**T was with a feeling of great anxiety that Edward Drake saw Lady Mildred leave the billiard room to go to Baron de Croiseuil, for he quickly guessed the reason of the Belgian's visit. Although Gaunt had not gone into details it was evident from what he had said that there was much in his Congo past that he would not care to have reach his wife's ears. By all accounts the Baron was a most unscrupulous adversary, and would not hesitate to use the knowledge that he possessed.

After a few moments' thought, Drake hastened to the telephone and got into communication with the city office, only to find that Gaunt was not there.

"Please ask him to come to Park Lane as soon as he returns," Drake said to Foster the secretary, and then went back to the billiard room.

Lady Ethel was idly knocking about the billiard balls, and she did not look up when he entered.

"Where is my brother?" he asked.

"He suddenly remembered that he had an appointment at the war office," she answered, as she deftly made a cannon. "This is a good chance for the lesson I promised to give you," she said demurely.

Drake went to the rack from which he took the first cue that came to hand.

"I am afraid that you will find me rather a duffer," he remarked.

"Your education has been neglected — in many ways."

Then she gave him a quick look which he failed to catch.  
"You may break."

But Drake's hand trembled, and he made a miscue.

"Try again," she said lightly, and placed the ball back in balk.

Again he tried to make the shot, with a similar result.

"It is no use, I am an awful duffer," he said apologetically.

She watched him as he replaced the cue in the rack, and her eyes twinkled with mischief.

"You are very easily discouraged. I thought better things of you, Mr. Drake," she said with a laugh, but suddenly her face became grave and she approached more closely to him. "Would you mind telling me why you did not wish my sister to see the Baron de Croiseuil?"

Drake knew not what to say, for he could not tell her the real reason.

"I do not ask merely from curiosity. I am not quite a fool, although you may think that my intelligence is below the average, and I am not blind to what is going on. It seems to me that my sister and her husband are drifting apart and that you know the reason of it," she said with unusual seriousness.

Still he did not answer, and she grew impatient.

"Am I not right? Mr. Gaunt has changed in a marvellous way since he has known you — and I wish you to take me into your confidence."

"I can't do so, Lady Ethel. I shall be grateful if you will change the subject. All I can say is that I will spare no effort to prevent any disagreement between Mr. Gaunt and his wife. But there are great issues at stake, and

Lady Mildred must not be the only consideration," he said earnestly.

"No issue can be so great as my sister's happiness," she answered impetuously.

"I do not agree with you, Lady Ethel. Please don't say any more," he said appealingly.

"I won't for the present, but I am disappointed in you. Your brother would not have answered as you have done."

His face flushed, and he took a step towards her. Her eyes regarded him steadily, and their expression contained a hint of defiance.

"My brother would only do what is consistent with honor," he answered with quiet dignity.

A silence followed, and both were conscious of a feeling of nervousness. Edward Drake came to a sudden decision, and spoke impulsively.

"My brother is the only relative that I have in the world, and we are more than brothers, for we are friends. Lindsay is as generous-hearted a man as ever breathed, and I have never known him guilty of a mean action. Lady Ethel, he is very dear to me, and I should grieve to see him hurt. Perhaps I ought not to speak to you in this way, but I think that you understand what I mean. For some years he has lived among savages, and the life there has made him forget many things. During these last few days he has only remembered that he is a man, and you a woman. Your beauty has blinded him to the fact that he is a poverty-stricken soldier, while you are a lady of title, who ——"

While he spoke the color had left her cheeks, and she interrupted him peremptorily.

"Don't you think that you might allow your brother to speak for himself? You parsons imagine that it is your prerogative to meddle in affairs that do not in the least concern you."

"My brother's happiness concerns me greatly," he said quietly.

"Isn't he old enough to look after himself? You are a strange man, Mr. Drake, and just a little bit impertinent. Of course, I use the word in its classical sense," she added hastily.

He smiled, but it was a sad smile, and she relented immediately.

"I don't think you need be troubled about your brother's happiness," she said gently.

"You mean?"

As he asked the question he was conscious of a fierce pain tugging at his heart, for he dreaded to hear her answer.

"I mean — nothing," she cried gaily.

The door was thrown open and Gaunt strode in, putting an end to the conversation.

"I got your message. What is it?" he asked quickly of Drake.

The latter glanced significantly at Lady Ethel who understood his meaning.

"I will relieve you of my presence, and I hope that I have completely reassured you."

The last sentence was addressed to Drake, and was spoken so mockingly that he winced, and the color came to his cheeks.

"What's the matter?" Gaunt demanded as soon as they were alone.



There was a worried look on his face, and it seemed to Drake that there were lines around his eyes that he had not before noticed.

"Baron de Croiseuil called this afternoon, and Lady Mildred insisted upon seeing him. They may be together now."

Gaunt smothered an oath, as he crossed the room to ring the bell, and no word was spoken until the footman came.

"Is your mistress alone?" Gaunt demanded abruptly.

"Yes, I think so, sir."

"Has the Baron de Croiseuil gone?"

"Yes, sir. About a quarter of an hour ago."

"You can go, James," Gaunt said to the footman, and as soon as the latter had left the room he sank back into a chair with a groan.

"Is it very serious, what he might say to Lady Mildred?" Drake asked hurriedly.

"Lady Mildred will consider it more than serious. But don't talk for a few minutes. I want to do some hard thinking."

It was a quarter of an hour before Gaunt sprang to his feet, and there was the light of battle in his eyes.

"Sit down, father confessor, while I tell you the whole story," he said with a mirthless laugh.

"There was a man named Marillier on the Congo. A blackguard of the worst description, and soon after I arrived in the country we came into contact. He was the most callous of all the brutes that go to make up Congo officialdom, and in those days I was not inured to sickening sights. One day I went to his station, and found him with his own hand flogging a young girl of

about fifteen, one of his numerous native wives. He used the *chicotte*, a murderous instrument of torture, and the girl was half dead. I lost my temper, and seized the *chicotte* with which I gave him a little of what he had been giving the girl."

"I am very glad to hear it," Drake cried vehemently.

"I took the poor girl on to my own station, and that night Marillier turned up in a drunken rage. In his hand he carried a revolver, and commenced firing at me. I had no desire to die, so I took my own weapon and fired."

Gaunt paused, and his breath came quickly.

"My shot reached home, and he died."

"You were justified by every moral law," Drake said quietly.

"So the officials seemed to think who investigated the matter, for I heard no more about it until last night when the Baron visited me," Gaunt said grimly.

"I am confident that Lady Mildred will hold you justified when she hears your side of the story."

"I hope so, but that isn't the worst from her point of view. There is only one thing that I dread her hearing, and the Baron knows it."

"What is that?" Drake asked anxiously.

"It isn't a pretty story, but you'd better know it. Of course you can't appreciate the code of morality that exists in West Africa. Nearly all the white men out there have native wives. In fact, many of the Congo officials have half a dozen. From the woman's point of view, it is a valid marriage and her status is raised thereby. You can guess what is coming," Gaunt said miserably.

"You had a native wife?"

"No. But the general belief throughout the Congo was that I had taken Marillier's native wife and that that was the reason why he had attacked me. But there is no necessity to go into details, and I will simply say that while I was on the Congo, I lived a clean life, as far as women are concerned. You know Lady Mildred, and if the Baron should tell her——"

Gaunt broke off, and turned away so that Drake should not see the misery in his eyes. The latter had listened to this recital in dismay, for he saw clearly that Lady Mildred would be deeply hurt should the Baron have told this story, and he could say no word of comfort.

"Why don't you speak? Do you think that I have lied to you?" Gaunt demanded fiercely.

"No. Of course I believe you, but I fear that your enemies have a powerful weapon. The Baron may honestly believe that you killed Marillier on account of the woman, but——" He ceased to speak, and his face cleared. "I don't think the Baron will have told Lady Mildred, yet; for he will hold it in reserve to use against you. Why don't you go to her yourself at once and tell her? Hearing it from you she might believe, while if the knowledge came from a stranger—there would always remain a suspicion."

"You have set me a hard task, and I don't think that I have the strength to carry it out," Gaunt said dully.

"Believe me, it is the best plan—the only one," Drake said impetuously.

Gaunt did not answer, but stared moodily into the fire and the silence became oppressive, but soon there was a knock at the door and a footman entered.



"Her ladyship would like to see you in her room," he announced.

"Now is your chance," Drake whispered earnestly. But Gaunt did not move.



## CHAPTER XIX

LADY MILDRED was thoroughly upset by the interview with Baron de Croiseuil, for she realized that a grave warning had been given her. When her anger subsided, it was only natural that she should be curious about her husband's past life in the Congo, and although she knew that Gaunt had been no saint, it was difficult to believe that he had ever done anything to warrant the Baron's thinly disguised threat. Not for a moment did she regret the attitude she had taken up; indeed, pride had left no alternative, but all the same she was conscious of a feeling of uneasiness, and looked forward with impatience to meeting her husband.

She waited restlessly for the footman whom she had sent to see if he had returned.

"Did you give Mr. Gaunt my message?" she asked when he appeared.

"Yes, my lady."

"Is he coming?"

"Mr. Gaunt did not say. He is in the billiard room with Mr. Drake."

"That will do," she said by way of dismissal.

A quarter of an hour passed, and when Gaunt did not arrive, her uneasiness increased; but at last he appeared, and she at once noticed a strangeness in his manner.

"I am sorry I have been so long," he began apologet-

ically; but he was regarding her anxiously, to see if he could gather from her attitude whether the Baron had spoken.

"I had a visit from the Baron de Croiseuil this afternoon. But won't you sit down, John?" she said nervously.

Gaunt was inclined to think that she was still in ignorance of what he dreaded that she should hear, and a quick sigh of relief escaped him.

"What did the Baron want? You will understand that he is not exactly my friend," he said very quietly.

"So I gathered from my interview, for he spoke very plainly about these speeches you have been making. I am afraid that you will find him an active enemy if you continue to interest yourself in the Congo."

"The Baron and I have already discussed that matter at some length, and we were unable to arrive at an agreement. I presume he came to ask you to persuade me to keep my mouth shut?" Gaunt said grimly.

"You are right, and he did not mince matters."

"It is his habit to be blunt where bluntness suits his purpose. May I ask what line he took?" he said casually, but Lady Mildred could see that he was very anxious.

"It appears that you left rather an unsavory record behind in the Congo, and he suggested that his friends might find it necessary to see that your past was resuscitated. He spoke in a perfectly friendly way, and pretended that he had come out of consideration for myself, imagining that some of the mud which would be thrown at you might stick upon myself," she said hurriedly.

"I see," he answered reflectively, and then paused for

a while. "Would you mind telling me how you answered him?"

"I rang for the footman, and gave orders that in future I should not be at home if he called," she replied quietly.

Gaunt's face lighted up wonderfully, and she blushed at the sight of the emotion that her answer had conjured up.

"That was good of you, Mildred. But you could not have acted differently. About this black record of mine on the Congo; weren't you curious to know of what it consisted? Didn't you ask him for particulars?"

"I was curious, I admit, but I would not lower myself by questioning him," she answered proudly.

"And you still are curious?" he persisted.

"Yes," the answer came reluctantly.

Their eyes met, but Gaunt quickly turned away to conceal the struggle that was taking place in his mind. Now was the opportunity of making his confession; but when he remembered its sordid nature, the words refused to come. In his imagination he could see the look of loathing that would come to her face, and suddenly he determined that at all costs she must remain in ignorance of the fact that he had killed a man, and might be charged with the crime of murder.

"I wonder if you would be content to remain in ignorance? I must admit that before I met you, I did many things that you would condemn, but I would rather that you remained in ignorance of them. Knowledge can do no good. Do I ask too much?" he said eagerly.

It was clear to him that she was disappointed by his request and he waited anxiously for her to speak.

"John, I feel that I am becoming surrounded by mystery," she cried impetuously. "If we are driven apart — which God forbid! — it will be because you refuse to give me your confidence. I am going to ask you a favor, and I want you to think carefully before you give me an answer. The other day I wished you to take me away at once and you refused. It is not an easy matter for me to repeat the request; but I do so, and very earnestly, for I believe that if we were alone for a while, all this foolish suspicion would vanish, and ——"

"And ——?" he repeated dully when she hesitated.

"It is difficult for me to speak of the new feeling which has crept into my heart, but I believe that I could love you, if you would allow me to do so."

"Mildred," he cried hoarsely, and rising, held out his arms towards her.

"No, John. Before that, everything must be clear and straightforward. I must confess that I cannot understand why you are waging this war on the Congo officials, for it is not your nature to turn upon those who were once your friends, and who helped you to your present position. I want to know why you are doing so. Have you suddenly become religious, and is it from a sense of duty?"

Gaunt shook his head, and his depression increased.

"There must be some very forceful reason, for you are running a great risk. The Baron will certainly do all the mischief that he can. Perhaps he will publish your record, and that will not be very pleasant for either of us. And there's baby to be considered."

Her voice sank and contained a note of awe when she spoke the last sentence.



"I am willing to sink my curiosity — which is something for a woman to sacrifice. I am willing to do anything you like, so long as you will promise to come away with me," she said with quiet earnestness.

Gaunt was moved, and for a moment was sorely tempted to agree to what she proposed, whatever might be the consequences. It must be remembered that he loved his wife passionately, and that she was offering him all that he desired — her love. A few weeks ago he would have been overjoyed and his happiness would have been complete — but now —

His bond was stronger than his love. The temptation was ruthlessly swept aside, and there was born a determination which in the future should be his guide with reference to his wife — he would not accept her love unless he could come to her with perfectly clean hands, and that could not be until his fight for the Congo natives was finished. Mud would be thrown at him, and his reputation might be blackened, but when the struggle was over, and she would know the worst — save perhaps that one thing which he must keep from her at all costs.

Now she was offering him her love, and should he pass it by, might it not be refused him later on? Lady Mildred was proud and would feel deeply his refusal; but there seemed to be no alternative, and he braced himself up to speak.

"I would give all that I possess in the world to be able to do what you wish, but I cannot," he said desperately.

"And I may not know the reason?" she said coldly, and her face had grown very white.

"I can only tell you that my honor is bound up in the

Congo. You yourself encouraged me to undo some of the harm for which I was responsible. I have vowed——”

He broke off and turned away so that she should not see his emotion.

“I have vowed not to turn back,” he continued more firmly. “And I cannot break my word. You would not respect me if I did so.”

“Is that all you have to say? Do you intend to turn me deliberately out of your life?” she cried passionately.

“Mildred — I can only ask you to be patient and to trust me.”

There was a world of appeal in his voice, but now she had hardened her heart against him, and was unaffected.

“I love you body and soul, and if you only knew what your offer meant to me — a happiness so intense as almost to amount to pain. Since we first met, my whole object in life has been to win your love. During all our months of married life your indifference was a torture; but I was determined to be patient, for the ultimate reward was worth any sacrifice. And then came the baby. My hopes rose, and ——”

“You tell me that you love me, and yet you refuse my request. You stultify yourself, John. Love that cannot make this little sacrifice is unworthy of the name.”

“Sacrifice,” he repeated vehemently. “There is no sacrifice that I would not gladly make for the happiness of which you have given me a glimpse.”

“John.”

Her face had softened wondrously, and she held out her hand towards him. It appeared to Gaunt that his

wife had never been so beautiful, and the temptation to take her in his arms became maddening.

"John," she repeated softly.

"Don't tempt me, Mildred. You do not know what you are doing. If I were to accept, I should never know a moment's happiness. My soul would be eternally damned, and I could never look into your eyes without feeling ashamed. No, I will play the game, and you shall have an honest man for husband, and not a poltroon," he cried vehemently.

She realized that he was deeply moved and that the words were wrung from him, but she could not understand, and without understanding could give him no sympathy.

"Again this mystery, John. What does it mean?" she asked wearily. But he would not reply, but turned away to the window through which he stared moodily. The reaction had set in and he longed to be alone, for the sight of her tormented him, reminding him of what he was thrusting from his life.

At last he looked round, and found that she had gone. With a savage laugh he stepped into the middle of the room, but suddenly his eyes alighted upon a small lace handkerchief which lay on the floor. It was the work of an instant to pick it up and place it in his pocket.

Down-stairs to the library he went, and there found Edward Drake, who was reading an evening newspaper.

"Have you told her?" Drake asked anxiously.

"No, and I don't intend to do so," Gaunt cried harshly.

"Then God help you!"



Gaunt laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"I shall need your prayers and His help," he said, and then sank back into the chair, covering his face with his hands.



## CHAPTER XX

**J**OHN GAUNT sat motionless while Drake looked at him with eyes that were brimming over with sympathy, for it was easy for him to guess what had occurred. Although disappointed that his advice had not been followed, he could not greatly blame the millionaire for having lacked the courage to make a confession that might have estranged him from his wife forever.

"You are addressing another meeting to-night. It will soon be time to dress," he remarked.

"You expect me to speak to-night, when my soul is tortured? Have you no pity, man? Do you realize what the carrying out of this vow means to me? I have but to break it and all my difficulties vanish. Drake, I am beginning to think I must give in," he wound up wearily.

The passion had vanished and a great anguish of mind had taken its place, for he had been thinking, and it seemed as though he had signed the death warrant of his happiness by refusing his wife's request. Even the strongest men have moments of weakness and Gaunt lost grip of his purpose, revealing himself as he had never before done to human being.

"You, Drake, are a cold-blooded saint—a man untouched by thought of woman and you cannot imagine the awful longing which is in me. I worship my wife, and every fibre of my being longs for her. Now I

must forego my desire, and —— By Heaven! I can't do it. To hell with the Congo, for I've done with its suffering niggers," he cried recklessly.

Drake's face was white and drawn, his lips moved but no words could be heard during the breathless silence that followed.

"I'm not an archangel and I can't rise to your heights. It is my nature to sink and —— What am I saying?" Gaunt broke off abruptly, and wildly brushed his hand across his forehead.

Edward Drake's breath came quickly but still he would not speak and, approaching Gaunt, affectionately placed his hand on his shoulder.

"I, too, love as you do, and I understand. Gaunt, you are my friend, and I am proud of it. I believe in you, and know that you do not mean the words that you have spoken. During the last few days I have been filled with admiration for the things you have done. You have shown courage of a high order. You made a vow and you have carried it out in the spirit and the letter. Gaunt, you will not weaken, I implore you. Remember the good that you have already done. You are rousing England from its lethargy, and you only have to continue to win the battle. Think of it, Gaunt. You can save the natives from torture and make them free men. Could mortal man have a nobler task?"

He spoke with deep feeling, but his words were unheeded.

"Can you blame me if I give way? On the one hand is the love of my wife and on the other a bitter fight that may lose me every friend that I possess. In a few days the country may ring with the things that I

have done, and my wife may be ashamed at the mention of my name. You deliberately ask me to make this sacrifice, and for what? For a promise made in a moment of dire distress, when I scarcely knew what I was saying," Gaunt cried vehemently.

"For a promise made to God," Drake said in a low voice.

His face showed signs of a great emotion, and suddenly he sank to his knees and prayed aloud.

"I pray you to give this man courage to endure, so that this great good can be accomplished."

And then his voice sank, so that Gaunt could not catch the fervent words he uttered. But Drake's action of falling on to his knees had recalled the millionaire to his senses, for it brought vividly back to his mind the night of anguish when he had made the vow. And soon the weakness passed and he became once more the strong man, so that he was ashamed of the words that he had spoken.

Drake rose to his feet, and his face was still very white, but when he saw the change in Gaunt, he gave a glad cry and ran towards him.

"Thank God," he cried fervently and held forth his hand.

Gaunt did not speak at once but looked curiously at the man who was exerting such an influence on his life.

"I am sorry, Drake. Please forget this pitiable scene, and I promise you that it sha'n't occur again. I was a little upset, and ——"

"Say no more. You have fought a bitter fight and won."

"I think it was the sight of you praying that gave me

strength to conquer." Then he glanced hastily at his watch. "You were quite right. It is time to dress," he said quickly, and Drake knew that the subject must never again be mentioned between them.

They met again at dinner, and Gaunt was relieved that his wife was absent. Lady Ethel and Captain Drake did most of the talking, and the former declared her intention of accompanying the others to the meeting.

"My sister is tired, and I shall be all alone. May I not come?" she asked Gaunt who looked doubtfully at her.

But she persisted and when consent was finally given, she ran away to get ready.

That night Gaunt surpassed himself, and his words caused a deep impression on the vast crowd that was present. The emotion of the afternoon had not entirely left him, and perhaps it was that which gave him additional eloquence, so that there were many moist eyes when he resumed his seat.

Lady Ethel was amazed at the earnestness of her brother-in-law, and she gave a quick look at Edward Drake.

"Mr. Gaunt has spoken as one inspired," she said in a low voice. "Are you responsible for his joining in this crusade?"

"No; but I share his desire to help the Congo people. If I had his gift of eloquence, I should be only too glad to speak as he is doing. Don't you admire him for it?" he asked quietly.

"I am thinking of my sister, while you think only of the Congo," she answered gravely, and then lapsed into silence.



But when they were home again she returned to the subject.

"Sit down," she said to Drake, "and answer me one question. Why is Mr. Gaunt doing this? I am sure it is not solely from a philanthropic motive, and I believe that you are at the bottom of it. I cannot deny that it is a good work, and I am filled with pity for the poor natives who are so cruelly treated. But from my knowledge of Mr. Gaunt's character, he is not the man to concern himself with such a thing. In fact, I used to imagine him to be rather a bad lot in a respectable sort of way. Before he became engaged to my sister, I received many letters from friends, and they were not all filled with complimentary references to the man who was thought likely to become my brother-in-law. It seems to me that he is dreadfully worried about something and that something has to do with the Congo. You must not think that I cannot be serious and I tell you that I am very anxious to help my sister and her husband. Take me into your confidence, Mr. Drake—two heads are better than one," she said appealingly.

"I would willingly do so, Lady Ethel, but I have no right to speak without Mr. Gaunt's consent. In a way I am his servant," he answered regretfully.

Drake gave a sigh of relief when Gaunt entered accompanied by Captain Drake.

"I want a chat with you," the former said to him, and he rose so promptly that Lady Ethel smiled.

"You welcome the interruption," she said coldly, and then turned graciously to Captain Drake, who had occupied the chair vacated by his brother.

"Wasn't it a ripping meeting? I think Mr. Gaunt spoke splendidly," the latter said eagerly.

"Yes. He certainly aroused great enthusiasm. But do you think it will do much material good? Things will go on as before, and the natives will suffer just the same," she answered quietly.

"I am not so sure about that, for it is evident that England is waking up. The papers are pitching it a bit more strongly, and who knows that we may not be able to force the government to move."

"You seem almost as enthusiastic as your brother and Mr. Gaunt," she remarked, and gave him a quick look from beneath her lashes, which brought the color to his cheeks.

"I have been doing a great deal of hard thinking since I came back from West Africa. I never was a serious kind of chap like Edward, but I've always admired him. He has a wonderful way with him, and has compelled me to see things through his own eyes. Of course I have always known that the state of affairs in the Congo was a crying scandal, but it never worried me much till I heard Mr. Gaunt speak. Now I am with them heart and soul," he cried earnestly.

"Can you tell me what made my brother-in-law take up the Congo question?" she asked casually.

"There can be only one reason. He is acting from conviction," he answered wonderingly.

"If you really think that, then you don't know John Gaunt. So they haven't taken you into their confidence?" she said reflectively.

"What other reason could there possibly be?"

"That is just what I want to find out. Ask your brother, and let me know what he says."

"I will certainly do so, but I am sure that I am right. Mr. Gaunt is a 'white' man and could have no ulterior purpose in what he is doing. Besides, my brother would not be his friend if everything were not straightforward," he continued stoutly.

"There I agree with you," Lady Ethel broke in quickly. "And I do not suggest that his motive is an unworthy one. Your brother had practically admitted that a motive does exist, but he refuses to tell me what it is. Now I am not anxious to know merely from a sense of curiosity, but to help my sister, for she is very worried. Will you do your best to find out what it is and then let me know?"

Captain Drake looked at her, and there was intense surprise in his eyes.

"Would it be quite right that I should tell you when Edward does not wish you to know? I mean, should I be acting straightforwardly if I did so?" he suggested gently.

Lady Ethel jumped to her feet and it was evident that she was annoyed.

"Captain Drake, you ought to have been a member of your brother's profession. You are only fit for the Church. I did think that I could rely on you," she said reproachfully.

"You can rely on me, Lady Ethel; I would gladly lay down my life to serve you," he answered simply, and although the words may have been melodramatic, his manner of speaking made them sound natural.

"And yet you refuse this one little request — the first that I have ever made to you," she answered ironically.

"I am disappointed that you should have asked me to do such a thing. It was not worthy of you."

Their eyes met, and though his contained not a hint of reproach, she resented that he should dare to judge her actions.

"Good-night," she said curtly and hastened towards the door.

"Lady Ethel," he began hurriedly, but her only answer was to close the door rather sharply; and he sank back into his chair with a sigh.

"After all, she is only a child," he muttered.

And soon a smile came to his face, for he was remembering her many virtues, and he loved.



## CHAPTER XXI

**B**Y the following morning John Gaunt had decided upon his plan of campaign and without any delay started to work by communicating with the secretary of the Congo Reform Association. Money was to be spent lavishly, and capable speakers were chosen to speak in different parts of the country. Gaunt himself was to go to the great centres and his visits were to be advertised in every possible way. The secretary eagerly welcomed this new ally, and threw himself with energy into the task of making the necessary arrangements.

"I suggest that we bombard the papers with articles, and if there is any difficulty in getting them inserted, I am prepared to pay the advertisement rates," Gaunt said grimly.

Edward Drake was present at the interview, and rejoiced to see that Gaunt no longer hesitated, but was now even more determined to fulfil his vow.

"I should like these articles to be sent out at once — to-day if possible," Gaunt continued quickly.

"It shall be done," the secretary answered promptly.

For years he had waged a war against overwhelming odds and now he began to hope that success was in sight. Always he had lacked the help of such a man as Gaunt, with his millions, and he thanked Providence for his good fortune, but still, like the rest of the world, he could not quite understand why the millionaire had thrown himself into the fray.

Gaunt had devoted his brains to planning out the best way of rousing the country, and no detail was too small for his consideration. It was after a hard but satisfactory day's work that he returned home with Drake, and during the drive was wondering how he would be received by his wife. They did not meet until dinner time, and Lady Mildred showed him quite plainly but politely that she had not forgiven him for having refused to go away in the yacht.

In fact, during the meal, they were all conscious of a feeling of embarrassment, and it was a relief when the ladies left them to their cigars. Gaunt only spoke in answer to a question, for he was thinking over his position, and it seemed to him that the crisis must be very near at hand. The few hours of grace given to him by the Baron had elapsed, and it would not be long before his enemies made a move.

The next morning the newspapers were brought to him at an early hour, and the first thing that caught his eye was the front page of the *Daily Comet*, with its staring head-lines :

*" Gaunt and the Congo."*

And then he proceeded to read a bitter attack upon himself, and was forced to admit that the article had been written with the greatest skill, for it consisted of insinuations against his character which it would be difficult to rebut. The deal in Amanti shares was referred to in veiled terms, although to those on the inside the meaning was quite clear. The writer proceeded to refer to Gaunt's life in the Congo, and the words which followed were pungent.

" This millionaire has allied himself with the Church,

perhaps in the hope that the friendship of bishops would cause to be forgotten the means by which he gained his ill-gotten wealth. As we write there is before us a written record of this man's life in the Congo, and it seems incredible that he can have the effrontery to pretend that his aim is the betterment of the race that he himself has persecuted so atrociously.

"Why has John Gaunt started this campaign? We confess that we are unable to answer the question, and until we can do so, it is impossible to believe in his good faith. Philanthropy is the last charge which we should think of bringing against him, and we fear that he can only be animated by some motive that will ultimately benefit himself. It has been suggested that he is anxious to bring about European intervention, in the hope that he will be rewarded by the grant of valuable concessions."

Gaunt could read no more but threw down the paper in disgust, and he had no doubt that the Baron was responsible for this virulent attack. Another paper attracted his attention; the whole of the front page, which was usually occupied by advertisements, contained a statement upon the Congo question. It was written without any exaggeration, and plainly placed before the public the true state of affairs, laying special stress upon the manner in which the Belgians were deceiving Europe.

There were very few papers that did not contain a similar article, inserted as advertisements and paid for with Gaunt's money.

"Now I think that the fight has really commenced, and it won't be long before the Baron makes an answering move," he muttered to himself.

Shortly afterwards Edward Drake came in ; under his arm was a bundle of newspapers, and he smiled when he saw those that Gaunt had thrown on the floor.

"Isn't it splendid? I think we have made a good start," he said cheerfully.

"Do you refer to the article in the *Comet*?" Gaunt asked drily.

"No one will pay any attention to that 'rag,'" Drake answered quickly, and then hesitated for a moment. "I wonder if you would allow me to tell Lady Ethel everything? She might be able to help us?" he asked nervously.

A smile came to Gaunt's face, but he shook his head with decision.

"I am afraid that curiosity is one of her besetting weaknesses. I have noticed that she has been very anxious to find out what is going on, but I think it would be wiser to allow her curiosity to remain unsatisfied," he replied.

"I am not sure that it is idle curiosity," Drake said reflectively. "She is very fond of her sister, and——"

"We will change the subject," Gaunt said peremptorily, and Drake realized that it would be dangerous to persist further.

However, Gaunt was fated to meet with a more strenuous advocate, for Lady Ethel herself came into the library.

"Mr. Drake, I wish to speak to Mr. Gaunt," she announced quietly, and then smiled a little maliciously as he prepared to depart.

"What do you want? I'm busy and haven't much



time to spare," Gaunt said curtly, for he did *not* approve of the way in which she had spoken.

"Busy with the wretched Congo, I suppose? At any rate, you can find time to discuss a matter which affects the happiness of my sister," she said slowly. "Unless, of course, the wretched natives are of more consequence than your wife," she added quickly, and there was a look of defiance on her face.

"Don't you think you would be wiser to concern yourself with your own affairs? It would seem probable that they will require attention, if you go on flirting in the same reckless manner," he said significantly.

She flushed hotly and with difficulty suppressed an angry reply.

"I am not to be bluffed in that way. I have come for a serious talk and don't intend to go away until we come to an understanding," she said with quiet determination.

"Very well. Say your say and pray get it over as quickly as possible," he rejoined with a sigh of resignation.

"I passed the nursery just now. Your wife was there, and she was alone with the baby. She did not see me, and she was crying bitterly, and tears are nearly strangers to Mildred's eyes. Ah! I am glad that affects you a little. I don't mean to suggest that she hasn't faults, but at heart Mildred is a fine woman. She may have been selfish, but she is loyal through and through, and I honestly believe that she has learned to care for you."

She watched him anxiously, and was encouraged to proceed, for she noticed that his face had grown white, and there was a look of utter misery in his eyes.

"I must confess that when I was present at your wed-

ding, I imagined that she was selling herself to you, for I could see nothing attractive in your personality; and, girl as I was, I knew something of the way in which the world talked of you. All the time I was in France I was wondering how you were getting on together, and when I came home a few days ago I was amazed, for I believed that Mildred cared for you. What I have seen since has confirmed me in that belief."

She paused as if expecting him to make some remark, but Gaunt remained silent.

"I have no doubt that you love Mildred. At times I have seen an expression in your eyes when you have been talking to her that rather frightened me. But I think that I should like to be loved in the same way," she added pensively, and Gaunt uttered a harsh laugh.

"You love Mildred, and she loves you. That being so, may I ask what all this wretched fuss is about?" she demanded angrily.

"I repeat that I think that you had better mind your own business."

"I have asked Mildred and she will tell me nothing. Mr. Drake and his brother have practically admitted that there is a secret but they won't tell me what it is. I could not press them for an answer, but you are different."

Suddenly her whole manner changed, softening wondrously.

"John, dear, I like you, for I believe you to be a good sort. Not exactly the man that I should have chosen to be Mildred's husband, but I believe that you are the only one that could make her happy. I know you look upon me as a little fool, and perhaps you aren't

far wrong; but I love Mildred, and hate to see her miserable. Go to her now, take her in your arms and kiss her. Pack up your traps and clear off together."

"I wish to God that I could," he cried passionately. "Don't you realize that I love Mildred body and soul? And that I long for her in a way that you cannot understand? Do you think that it was an easy matter to put her deliberately out of my life? Ethel, it is killing me — this necessity — and yet I dare not do otherwise. You are a good little soul to come to me in this way, and I won't forget it. Ethel, dear, I, too, want your sympathy," he wound up brokenly.

She could see that he was suffering acutely, and immediately all her sympathy was aroused. She placed her hand on his shoulder, and bending her head, touched his forehead with her lips. Gaunt had revealed himself in a way that had surprised her greatly, for it was impossible to believe that he was not in deadly earnest, and her heart sank. The secret, whatever it might be, was evidently not a thing that could be swept aside easily; it was not a stupid misunderstanding, caused by stiff-necked pride, but something serious.

"John, I am sorry, and won't worry you any more, but I should like you to know that I am your friend, and that you can count on me," she said with simple earnestness.

There was a knock at the door and a footman entered.

"The Baron de Croiseuil wishes to see you, sir, and he asked me to say that his business was of the utmost importance. Her ladyship instructed me that she was 'not at home' should the Baron call, but as you had given me

no orders, sir, I thought it better to announce the Baron."

"You did quite right, James. I will see him here," Gaunt answered, but Lady Ethel intervened quickly.

"Don't see him, John," she cried appealingly.

Gaunt looked at her curiously, and then glanced at the footman who still waited.



## CHAPTER XXII

THE Baron de Croiseuil had not anticipated that Gaunt would give in to his threats, but he waited for the time to expire before taking any further steps. In the afternoon Sherren came round to the hotel to receive his instructions, and, in consequence, the article duly appeared in the *Daily Comet*.

The paper was brought to the Baron's bedroom the following morning, and when he read the references to Gaunt a grim smile came to his face, but his attention was attracted to the front page of the *Daily Herald*, and he uttered an exclamation of anger when he had mastered the advertisements that appeared there.

"So Gaunt has declared war," he muttered, and threw the paper impatiently away.

But shortly afterwards he rang the bell, and ordered a copy of each morning newspaper, only to find that the majority of them contained similar advertisements. It was his intention to send for Sherren, but that was unnecessary, for his satellite arrived just as he was finishing breakfast. For a long time they discussed the situation gravely, and it was the Baron who suggested the next move.

"What is the name of the man who forged the cable?" he asked of Sherren.

"Davis. I expect that he will arrive at Plymouth this morning, and I have arranged that Weiss should wire him to come to London at once."

"*Bien.* I wish to see Weiss this afternoon, and it would be as well if you try to get hold of Davis yourself."

"I will find out what time the special arrives at Paddington, and will meet him. The difficulty to my mind is how we can expose Gaunt's share in the Amanti business without giving Weiss away," Sherren remarked hoarsely.

"You may safely leave that in my hands. By the bye, are you in touch with the directors of the Amanti Mining Company?"

"Yes. The chairman is a personal friend of mine."

"Excellent. And do you think that you could persuade this friend to do what you asked?" the Baron asked significantly.

"Yes. But it might prove rather costly, but of course it would depend upon the nature of the service," Sherren replied promptly.

"We will talk of it later on, for there is no immediate hurry. In the meantime you must keep up your attack on Gaunt. Don't miss a single opportunity, for at all costs we must damage his reputation. It would seem that he is now working hand in hand with the secretary of the Congo Reform Association, and they are evidently planning out a campaign on a grand scale. I fear that this man Gaunt is rapidly capturing the sympathy of the public, and it is essential that we expose him so that anything he says will be discredited. I trust you to do your best, and your reward shall be commensurate with your success. Succeed in crushing Gaunt, and your future is assured," the Baron said earnestly.

"I will do all I can, Baron, but I must own to a certain

amount of admiration for Gaunt's pluck. He must know that he is risking a good deal, and yet he does not seem to hesitate. There is no mistaking from this new mood that he means business, for those advertisements must have cost a tidy penny. Besides ——"

"I shall expect you here at three o'clock with Weiss," the Baron interrupted him sharply, for he was not in the humor to listen to platitudes.

Sherren accepted his dismissal meekly, for he was not the man to resent outwardly a direct insult, so long as he was to receive a financial reward that was sufficiently great, but to himself he cursed the Baron with vigor.

De Croiseuil lighted a cigarette with great care, and sat down to think out his next move, and finally decided to call upon Gaunt, although he knew that it was very probable that he would be refused admittance. Indeed, the footman did hesitate, but finally asked him to take a seat in the hall.

"It will be unfortunate if madame comes along," the Baron thought as he waited.

It was some few minutes before the footman returned, and he became sure that his expectations would be realized, but to his great surprise he was asked to go to the library.

Gaunt was standing in the middle of the room facing the door, and his expression was cold and forbidding.

"If I had refused to see you, you might have imagined that I was afraid. I do not think that there is anything to be gained by this interview, and I shall be glad if you will state your errand in as few words as possible," Gaunt said grimly.

The Baron smiled, and his eyes moved around the room in search of a chair.

"You are not very polite, *mon ami*. But even if we are to be enemies you will not deny me the ease of a seat. I am no longer a young man, and — ah — thank you, Gaunt. I know you will not mind if I smoke a cigarette. I can talk so much better, and this morning I wish to be very eloquent."

"I have never known you, Baron, when you could not talk, and that time will only arrive when you are in your grave," Gaunt said drily.

"A truce to compliments. We know one another — our faults and our virtues, and so we will come to business. Of what extraordinary extravagances you have been guilty. These advertisements must have cost you a small fortune, and for what purpose, *mon cher*? You throw your money away and the return you will receive is what — ruin. I have not come here to threaten, but merely to state my intentions. If you persist in this mad course it will be my painful duty to act at once. Every dishonorable deed in your life shall be made public and there is a ghastly array to your discredit. Not only will there be those things in the Congo of which I have already reminded you, but there are many little affairs of England — many little deals by which you have enriched yourself that will not bear the light of day. It will pain me to make these exposures, but you yourself will be the first to see that they are necessary. It is my painful duty to discredit you to the world, and I shall succeed," the Baron wound up with quiet confidence.

"You appear to forget one thing, Baron. If I cease to speak, there are others who can take my place. You



may ruin my character, but that will not smother the cry for reform. You say that we know one another, but I think you are wilfully blind to my character. I have vowed to fight you until the natives are free, and receive equitable treatment, and nothing shall turn me back, now I have once started. You can do your worst," Gaunt cried contemptuously.

"And that is your final word?" the Baron said with a sigh.

"Yes. It will be well if you do not call here again for ——"

"There is no need to finish the sentence. Let us, at least, retain the appearance of politeness. You English are so brutal in your enmities. Although I am about to injure you seriously, I like you personally, Gaunt, and apart from this sordid business, I shall always be glad to meet you. So you have decided. I am very sorry, my friend, for I am afraid that Lady Mildred will ——"

"Be silent, and go," Gaunt cried harshly.

"I hate to war upon a lady, for she will suffer with you, and ——"

"Go."

There was a threat in Gaunt's voice, and the Baron perceptibly hastened his step, and his nether lip trembled slightly. The footman threw open the door, and he hastened to cross the hall, but when he reached the pavement he stood there for a few moments. Then he strode slowly towards Piccadilly but had not gone very far before he heard his name called from behind.

He turned quickly and uncovered his head.

"Madam," he said, and bowed politely to the beautiful girl who had joined him.

"I am Lady Ethel Blythe."

"Ah! I knew your sister, but in those days I think you must have been at school," he said pleasantly, and there was unconcealed admiration in his eyes.

"Will you not come into the park? I wish to speak to you," Lady Ethel remarked, nervously.

She had acted on the impulse of the moment, and was already beginning to regret the step that she had taken, but the Baron was only too glad of the chance of gaining information, and so promptly led the way across the road, keeping up a steady flow of conversation until they reached a row of chairs.

"Won't you sit down, Lady Ethel? I do not think it is too cold, for your furs will keep you warm," he said suavely, and again she encountered the look of admiration in his eyes.

"Why have you quarrelled with Mr. Gaunt?" she demanded suddenly.

It was with the idea of helping her sister that she had intercepted the Baron, and already she realized that she would receive no consideration from this man whom instinct told her to distrust. Suddenly she grew afraid, and continued hurriedly: "I think I have made a mistake, Baron, and will go. Forgive me for having detained you."

"Stay, Lady Ethel. Please let us have a little talk, for I am sure that you may be the means of stopping Mr. Gaunt from ruining himself; that is, if you have any influence with your sister. My position is a particularly unfortunate one, for I was once a friend of your family, and Gaunt is compelling me to become his enemy."

"What is all this wretched bother about? What is

Mr. Gaunt attacking the Congo for?" she asked eagerly.

"If you could find out the answer to that last question, I should be eternally your debtor. Cannot you and I become allies? I give you my word of honor that I am anxious to be Gaunt's friend, if only he will permit me to be. Of course, I can understand that your sister must feel bitterly the insane course which her husband is taking?" he suggested, and she did not notice the eager look in his eyes.

"She naturally resents it, and is very unhappy," was her impulsive answer.

"I can readily understand that, and in my opinion she is quite justified in resenting it. But I do hope that they have not already seriously quarreled."

She glanced at him suspiciously for she could detect a note of insincerity in his voice.

"I have no right to discuss my sister's affairs," she said coldly.

However, the Baron had already obtained the information that he sought, but took good care that Lady Ethel should not see his satisfaction.

"May I ask you to use your influence both with your sister and with Gaunt to persuade the latter to abandon this wretched agitation? I am sure you will do so when I say that he is likely to suffer both in pocket and reputation, if he does not do so. I won't detain you any longer, Lady Ethel, but if at any time you should wish to communicate with me, I am staying at the Ritz."

Lady Ethel was eager to get away, but her face grew white, for approaching her rapidly was Edward Drake. The Baron, too, saw him, and smiled deprecatingly.

"Lady Ethel, I shall be glad to take you home. You must know that both your sister and Mr. Gaunt have given orders that this gentleman is not to be allowed to enter their house again," Drake said coldly, and stared at the Belgian, his eyes full of hostility.

"Then I have the honor of wishing you good-day."

And so saying the Baron raised his hat and strolled away.

Lady Ethel was silent as they walked along, and Drake could not decide if she were angry with him or herself, but he came to the conclusion that she needed a lesson.



## CHAPTER XXIII

THE Baron was quite pleased at his encounter with Lady Ethel, for it was well to know that Gaunt and his wife were not on good terms, and it ought not to be a difficult matter to widen the breach. Upon arriving at the hotel several telegrams were handed to him, and a frown came to his face as he read the cipher message from Brussels which urged him to stop Gaunt's campaign at all costs. But still he did not allow it to interfere with his enjoyment of a carefully selected lunch. The Burgundy was warmed to the exact temperature which suited his palate, and when the coffee was served he felt quite equal to the coming interview with Mr. Julian Weiss. He was dozing in an armchair before the fire when his visitor was announced, and he rose to greet the Jew with that suave pleasant manner for which he was famed.

"I am indeed pleased to see you. Of course you will smoke, and I can confidently recommend those Corona-Coronas."

The Baron himself did not care for cigars, but he was an excellent judge of them, and knew their value as a gift to one whom he wished to place on good terms with himself.

"Sherren came to me and said that you wished to see me on most important business. As you know, I am always prepared to consider a scheme in which I can see a reasonable profit," Weiss said, in his rather pompous manner, and then took a long draw at the cigar.

"It may disappoint you to hear that there is no money to be made out of our little talk."

"My time is valuable, Baron, and if I had known——"

"But I think that there are other things that appeal to you as well as money. You are not the man to forget a bad turn, and I understand that Gaunt rather bested you in a recent deal."

"Bested — he swindled me," Weiss cried hotly.

The Baron smiled faintly, as he heard the Jew's betrayal of his nationality, for in his anger the careful pronunciation had been forgotten.

"If your business concerns Gaunt, and there is a chance of getting level with him, then I am with you, money or no money."

"I imagined that would be your attitude. You say that Gaunt swindled you, and I've the same complaint to make against him. Only, in my case, he has betrayed those who were his friends, and who had helped him to his wealth. Now, I want you to tell me the whole of the circumstances of that deal in Amanti shares," the Baron said quickly.

There was a quick glance from Weiss that was full of suspicion.

"Of course, anything that you say I shall hold in the strictest confidence, and I shall take no step without consulting you," the Baron added quickly.

"All right, Baron. I know that you aren't over particular yourself, and you won't be shocked at a little sharp practice," Weiss said with a laugh, that grated on the Belgian's nerves.

"I got hold of a man named Davis, and it was arranged

that he should cable home a report in his manager's name to the effect that they had struck gold of a high grade. I didn't want my name to appear in the business, so I agreed with Gaunt to work the market. It came off, and Gaunt made his pile, but when I went to claim my share he practically told me to go to the devil," Weiss wound up angrily, for he still smarted to think of the way he had been "done."

"And to add insult to injury," he continued, "the blackguard sent a check in my name to the King's Hospital Fund for the amount I ought to have received."

"Have you any idea why he did that? It was very strange, for it could not have been on account of the money that he refused to pay you," the Baron remarked thoughtfully.

"I don't care a damn about his reasons. I want my twenty odd thousand pounds, and I'll have it, or Gaunt shall pay me in some other way," the Jew cried furiously, and jumping to his feet commenced to pace rapidly to and fro.

"I can see that you are going for him in the papers, and I'll give you as much information as you can want about various shady deals in which he has been concerned. And I'll give you the evidence to prove 'em up to the hilt. I swear I'll make the city too hot for Mr. John Gaunt before I've done with him."

"Didn't it turn out that there really was a valuable find of gold?"

"So they reported, but I have just heard that the report was incorrect, although the manager out there evidently believed in it. When I left the office Amantis were selling at five shillings with no buyers. I bought

myself when they were at two pounds, and so I got left again," Weiss said savagely.

"Very unfortunate. I do not wonder that you were angry. By the bye, have you any evidence that Gaunt had knowledge that the cable sent by Davis was forged?" the Baron asked casually.

"Yes. Read through this letter."

De Croiseuil rapidly scanned the few lines but his face gave no sign of the satisfaction that he felt.

"That seems quite clear. I wonder if you would mind if I kept this letter?" He placed it carefully in his pocketbook without waiting for an answer, and then continued more quietly.

"I shall be glad if you will send me details of any other shady transactions by Gaunt, and I will see that they are made use of at once. Now I think we have finished, and I expect you will be glad to get back to the City. Take another cigar."

"You will not allow my name to appear?" Weiss said uneasily.

"My dear sir, I am a gentleman, and — but you can trust me. Good-day, and thanks."

When Weiss had gone the Baron sent out for the evening papers, and once more settled himself in comfort before the fire, but as he read a frown came to his face, and he uttered an imprecation.

The same advertisement again stared him in the face, and it was natural that the public should take an interest in the spending of such large sums of money, even if the wrongs of the natives of the Congo failed to interest the "man in the street." Moreover, it was becoming realized that Gaunt was deeply in earnest and had deliberately



started to fight the powerful clique in Brussels. The millionaire's well-known character naturally increased the interest, and there could be no doubt that the agitation would soon extend so that its suppression would become an increasingly difficult task.

In great staring letters there was an announcement that Gaunt was to address a men's meeting at the Royal Albert Hall.

"And the man will fill the building," the Baron muttered uneasily.

It was no small thing for which he was fighting. It must be remembered that he and his friends received a large income, which would cease immediately, should the reform be forced upon them. Just as soon as the natives were given justice, the rubber would cease to come, at any rate until the country had had time to recover itself from years of merciless persecution. There were thousands of Belgians whose livelihood depended upon the continuation of the present régime, and in the event of its ceasing, Belgium would swarm with those men, most of them undesirables whose morals were utterly ruined by the lives they had led in the Congo.

And they had been going along so smoothly until the intervention of Gaunt. The death of King Leopold had promised to give them an indefinite prolongation of their reign, for his successor was a man of amiable character, who lived a clean life, and they could shelter themselves beneath his name. The great desire of Europe would be to give King Albert an opportunity of showing what he could do, for it was not realized that he possessed but titular power. The late King had been an absolute monarch, and his conduct had almost driven the people

to seek a Republic ; so that it was necessary for King Albert to tread warily, and become the most constitutional of sovereigns.

Of the Belgian Parliament the Baron had no fear ; there was no party that desired to see reform in the Congo save a few members who really understood the conditions of affairs in the Free State.

For years King Leopold had understood that the only possible means by which he could be stopped from garnering his tainted gold was by the awakening of England and the United States to the truth. He had recognized that these free people were sound at heart, loathing all persecution, and that should they once realize the brutal truth, their righteous indignation would insist upon the immediate freeing of the natives from a diabolical tyranny.

And now the danger of a great awakening loomed ahead.

The mask fell from the Baron's face, as these thoughts passed through his mind, and there was a malignant look in his eyes.

"I will break the man," he muttered vindictively.

Gone was the suave man of the world and the brutal savage was revealed. But at the sound of a knock at the door, his face changed and a smile was forced to his lips.

"Oh, it's you, Sherren. What news have you?" he asked pleasantly.

"I met Davis at Paddington, and I've got his address."

"Good. Here's a little document that you might like to read," the Baron remarked and handed over the letter given to him by Weiss.

Sherren looked at him admiringly, when he had mastered its contents.

"I wonder that Weiss cared to part with it, but I suppose that he was blinded by his rage against Gaunt. This little document simplifies matters, and ought to be very useful."

"Weiss is sending on further material against Gaunt, and I shall be glad if you will sift it thoroughly, for it's important that we don't make any mistakes."

The Baron turned to the waiter who had entered, and took a telegram from the silver salver, which he tore open impatiently:

*"Am forwarding Marillier documents. Advise that you proceed without delay."*

"There is no answer," he said, and then lapsed into silence, for the message gave him food for thought.

Sherren was glancing through the evening papers, and now and then stopped to make a note, which he intended to use in an article which he was preparing for the next day.

"*Eh bien.* I think we have finished for the present, Sherren. I would suggest that you see your friend, the chairman of the Amanti Mining Company, and show him that letter. You know what to advise him to do," the Baron said significantly.

"But what about Weiss? His name is compromised, and ——"

"I fear that this is not the moment for delicate scruples. Of course, I should like to protect Mr. Weiss in every way that is possible, but ——"

He shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"But if Weiss must suffer with Gaunt, it is unfortunate; but I shouldn't consider the chief rabbi himself if it would interfere with my attack on Gaunt. I shall await your report with much interest. Good-afternoon."

And the Baron took from a silver box on the table a cigarette which he carefully lighted. Then he drew a deep breath.

"Now I think we are coming to close quarters, and we shall see a pretty fight — but ——"

The Baron's face became moody.



## CHAPTER XXIV

**I**F John Gaunt had deliberately planned to fan his wife's dawning love into a fierce flame, he could not have acted in a manner more calculated to bring this about, for when Lady Mildred saw that he was deliberately avoiding every opportunity of intimate conversation, she became utterly miserable, although she had led him to believe that this was what she herself desired.

It was strange to her, this feeling of interest in her husband, and all day she found herself wondering what he was doing. At first she did not regret the attitude which she had taken up, but slowly it was being revealed to her that all other considerations were as nought when compared with love. With this realization there came a feeling of timidity which restrained her impulse to go to Gaunt and tell him what was in her heart.

What mattered his actions, however strange — what mattered his damaged reputation, so long as he loved her with the deep passion of which she had been permitted to catch a faint glimpse. She would force herself to forget the many mysterious things which surrounded her, and would only remember that he was her husband, and father of the child that she was rapidly growing to worship.

Of one thing she was convinced, that there was nothing mean in Gaunt's nature. If he had been guilty of

conduct which he was endeavoring to hide, and which was preying on his mind, it was nothing of which he need feel ashamed; and thus it will be seen that Lady Mildred did not yet understand the nature of the man that she had married.

On the morning that the Baron had paid his second visit, she had been communing with herself, and had decided to put an end to the estrangement that existed, but when she went down to lunch, her husband was not there.

Her sister and Edward Drake were present, and it very soon became clear to her that the atmosphere was electrical, for each of them avoided addressing any remark to the other.

Drake confined his attention to Lady Mildred, and the latter immediately began to imagine that he had proposed marriage to Lady Ethel, and had been refused.

At last the uncomfortable meal came to an end, and Lady Mildred rose from the table.

"Will you come to my room, dear?" she said, and Lady Ethel followed her obediently.

"What has happened?" Lady Mildred asked when they were seated.

"I hate him, he is a beast," Lady Ethel said vindictively.

"I suppose you mean Mr. Drake. What has the poor man done?"

"He has been very rude, and I believe he looks upon me as a child," she cried passionately.

"You are not much more than a child, Ethel. But what is it all about?" Lady Mildred asked with an indulgent smile.

"I really did it for the best. When the Baron left this morning I followed, and went with him to the park."

"It was a stupid thing to do. Baron de Croiseuil is not a desirable acquaintance," Lady Mildred answered disapprovingly.

"I only went for your sake, Mildred. I could see that you and John were miserable, and I guessed that it was all owing to the Baron, so thought I might help."

Lady Ethel was crying quietly, so her sister suppressed the angry words that were near her lips, and kissed her tenderly.

"There is no reason why you should make such a fuss about it," she said gently.

"I never imagined that Mr. Drake could be so rude. He told me that I was a meddlesome little busybody," Lady Ethel said hotly.

"They were rather strong words."

"And I really didn't mean to tell the Baron that you and John had quarreled; it slipped out."

"Mr. Drake was quite right," Lady Mildred broke in vehemently. "Besides, it is untrue that my husband and I have quarreled. I love him dearly."

"Well, you have a funny way of showing your affection," Lady Ethel broke in, and then began to sob in earnest.

Even at school she had been thoroughly spoilt, for her winning ways had endeared her to all, and Drake's strong words had come as a shock. Now her sister was adding to her misery, but she quickly recovered herself and sailed out of the room with rather a pitiable attempt at dignity.

Lady Mildred was annoyed at the occurrence, but she had more weighty thoughts to occupy her mind, and could only wonder how John would receive the advances which she had determined to make. To her great disappointment he did not return, and so soon after six o'clock she commenced to dress for dinner. Latterly she had taken but little interest in her toilet, and her maid was surprised and pleased by the care she took in choosing her gown. At last she was satisfied, and critically examined her reflection in the long mirror. The least vain of women, she knew that she was looking her best, and when she entered the drawing-room, excitement had brought a becoming touch of color to her cheeks.

It was a few minutes before Gaunt entered, and gave a quick glance around the room.

"I haven't much time to spare," he said hurriedly, and as he spoke dinner was announced.

During the meal Lady Ethel was particularly gracious to Captain Drake, and practically ignored his brother.

"Drake, we must be going," Gaunt said after a glance at his watch.

Lady Mildred also rose and accompanied them to the hall.

"Will you be very late, John?" she said nervously.

"No. I shall be back as soon as the meeting is over," he answered, and could not keep a note of surprise from his voice.

"Then will you come to my room?" she said in a low voice.

"Very well, dear," he answered, and gave her a quick



look, but her face was turned away, and he uttered a faint sigh which failed to reach her ears.

Lady Ethel had followed more slowly, and she did not appear to notice Edward Drake who was standing near.

"I hope you have recovered," he remarked with a smile. "Perhaps I was a little hard, but you really deserved all that I said. I can see that you are still angry with me, but if you take a night to think it over, you will arrive at the conclusion that I was right."

"I was not aware that Mr. Gaunt had appointed you father confessor to the whole family. Mr. Drake, you really take too much upon yourself," she said haughtily.

"Come along," Gaunt cried impatiently.

For a time Lady Ethel sat with her sister, but she was ill at ease, and at an early hour expressed her intention of going to bed. Lady Mildred was relieved by her departure, for she wished to be alone with her thoughts.

A clock chimed ten o'clock, and she went to her bedroom, where she summoned her maid and clothed herself in a dressing-gown covered with clouds of filmy lace that was priceless. Every jewel was removed except her wedding-ring, and at last she was satisfied with her appearance.

"If it were my last mistress, I should say that my lady was about to receive her lover," was the maid's unspoken thought.

"May I say that my lady is very beautiful to-night?" the maid remarked respectfully, and she regarded her mistress with the eye of an expert.

It was the first time that she had dared venture upon a compliment, and she half expected a rebuke as a reward, but Lady Mildred only smiled faintly.

"There are some deep red roses, my lady. At your breast they would give the one finishing touch that makes perfect. May I fetch them?" the maid asked eagerly.

"Am I a simple little fool?" Lady Mildred asked herself when she once again entered the room to which she had invited her husband.

Time passed slowly, and once or twice she took up a book only to throw it down again with a sigh of impatience. Eleven o'clock struck, and she began to wonder if he would fail to come.

But at last there was a knock at the door, and in answer to her call John Gaunt strode into the room. His face was drawn and he had the appearance of a man who was exhausted physically and mentally. But his eyes lighted up with admiration and passionate love when they rested on his wife.

"Sit down, dear," she said nervously. "You look very tired. Did you have a successful meeting?"

As she spoke she took up a cushion, and placed it beneath his head.

"I don't often wait on you, John," she said in a low voice.

He could not keep the wonder from his face, for never had she been so gentle, and so entirely fascinating. But he remembered his determination, and kept a tight hold upon himself.

Then she sank down on the rug beside him and rested her elbows on his knees. At first her eyes were cast down, but suddenly she raised them and looked straight at him.

"Mildred," he whispered hoarsely.

"John, dear, let me tell you what is in my heart," she began tremulously. "I don't think that I am the same woman that you married, for I feel—— Forgive me if I say a lot about myself, for that is the only way in which I can make you understand. When we married, I did not care for you, I'm not sure if I even liked you, for at times you made me afraid. However, I was watching you and learning. But I was blind and selfish until baby came, and it was not till then that I began to understand something of what life can contain."

John Gaunt scarcely dared to breathe as he listened. He knew how deeply she must be moved to reveal herself so openly to him.

"Since baby came it has been a gradual awakening. Even when I asked you to take me away on the yacht, I did not fully understand. I only knew that my feelings towards you had changed, and that you occupied my thoughts almost entirely."

As she continued her voice took a deeper tone, and her eyes were not removed from his, so that he could see their changing expression and gathering passion.

"And then you refused to go away with me, and I was deeply hurt, for I naturally thought that you did not want me. I even feared that I had lost your love, and it was agony — agony."

He could feel the trembling of her arms, and he longed to clasp her to him. But dare he do so, with his past unconfessed? He had decided that he would not again seek her love until he could go to her with clean hands, and yet——

"But soon it was revealed to me that the world was nothing. If you have sinned in the past, if you fear that

people will make charges against you, that could not affect you and me, John." Her voice was tremulous, and there was a wild appeal in her eyes.

"John, it is difficult to say the words, but I love you, body and soul, even as I believe that you love me."

She rose to her feet and looked down at him with an air of pride in this declaration of her love.

"All petty considerations have vanished. I make no conditions. I ask no favor of you, save that you shall love me."

He remained silent, and a great fear clutched at her heart.

"John," she whispered faintly.

With a cry of passion he took her in his arms and crushed her to him.

"Mildred."

And her lips sought his, for the first kiss of acknowledged love.



## CHAPTER XXV

**T**HE Earl of Lynton was not in the best of tempers as he entered the boat train at Dover, on his way to London. An attaché to the British embassy in Paris, he had received peremptory instructions by cable from Sir Keith Hamilton, the secretary of state for foreign affairs, to proceed to London and report himself at the foreign office, immediately upon his arrival.

It was natural that he should be curious as to the reason why his presence should be so urgently required. Had it been a couple of years ago he would have imagined that his many creditors had been making themselves objectionable to the authorities, but his sister Mildred's marriage to John Gaunt had, once for all, removed that sort of worry from his life.

The Earl was a very ordinary sort of man of average intelligence, but with a keen capacity for the enjoyment of life. To do him justice he had been reluctant that his sister should marry Gaunt, and, in spite of the great pecuniary advantages attached to the match, he had not said a word to influence her decision.

Almost immediately after the marriage, he had received his appointment to Paris, and since then had paid very few visits to England. Neither Lady Mildred nor himself were good correspondents, but he had gathered the impression that she was quite content with her lot.

During the last few days he had noticed reports in the French papers connecting Gaunt with the Congo agita-

tion, but it was not until the journey to London that he realized there was anything serious in the matter.

It chanced that there was a lack of interesting news at the moment and editors had seized upon John Gaunt to make the sensation of the hour. The *Daily Comet* had started its special commissioner to work, and that gifted penman could raise a storm where all was peace, and he was accordingly paid the salary of a cabinet minister.

Now Lord Lynton's one failing was an overweening pride in his name, and he felt hurt that Gaunt's action should have brought about those disgraceful comments which would naturally reflect upon his sister, for the *Comet* was suggesting that his brother-in-law was a most undesirable person; and so the Earl was determined that the Congo crusade must come to an end.

As a matter of fact he knew but little of Gaunt's character, for they had met on very few occasions, and each time there had been a little natural embarrassment on his part, for his future brother-in-law had quietly insisted on paying his debts, and settling upon him and his heirs a sum of money which had made him comfortably well off, if not rich. Lord Lynton had demurred to accepting these favors, even at the hands of a future relative, but Gaunt had taken no notice of his protests and had merely given instructions to the family solicitors, and the Earl had found that his debts had been paid and the settlement executed. After all Lady Mildred was making a sacrifice in marrying a mere financier, and it was very comforting to think that the worry of a heavy load of debt had been removed from her mind.

At Victoria Station Lord Lynton jumped into a taxicab, and drove straight to the foreign office, where

he was received almost immediately by Sir Keith Hamilton.

"I am sorry to have brought you from your arduous duties so abruptly," the foreign secretary remarked by way of greeting, and there was a twinkle in his eye.

Sir Keith had the reputation of being a strong minister, and perhaps it was owing to the fact that he knew when to remain silent. His speeches in the House were of admirable terseness, and he had made a point of steering as clear as possible of party conflicts, so that he enjoyed the respect and confidence of each side of the House. It was rarely that any rash member tried to cross swords with him, for he possessed a biting wit that was used unsparingly, greatly to the discomfiture of his adversaries.

Lord Lynton smiled but made no answer to the remark.

"As a matter of fact I want you here only because you are the brother-in-law of John Gaunt. I suppose that in the moments that you can spare from society you do sometimes study international politics, and you are probably aware that there is room for improvement in the present position. I am referring more particularly to Germany, but I don't blame them more than ourselves. If war ever takes place between us, it will have been brought about by the press. The position is such that we have to avoid every possibility of disagreement, and your worthy brother-in-law is embarrassing me considerably. The Congo must be a great question in the future, and I am anxious to delay the day as much as possible. The Free State is surrounded by colonies owned by England, France, and Germany, and each country would



like the largest slice when the division takes place. Unfortunately Germany is absurdly jealous of England, and we reciprocate the feeling just as absurdly. Therefore they will look upon any step we may take with the greatest suspicion, and we should return the compliment. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, I think so," Lord Lynton answered quietly.

"Good. This being the state of affairs, it is essential that the Congo question should be kept out of sight as much as possible. Your brother-in-law evidently does not understand this, for he is responsible for an agitation which is rapidly becoming a nuisance. I think you will now understand what I want. Gaunt must be silenced, and it struck me that you, being a relative, were the most desirable person to bring this about."

"I don't know that I have any influence with Mr. Gaunt. True, he is my brother-in-law, but we have seen very little of one another," the Earl said doubtfully.

"Then you must cultivate his acquaintance. Probably you have some influence with your sister. You may be able to reach Gaunt through her. I want you to appreciate that the matter is very serious, and that you must leave no stone unturned to make him keep his mouth shut. If once the British public gets the bit between its teeth, there is no holding it, and we shall be forced to intervene."

"I see the danger, and I will do my best, sir."

"Good. If he is obstinate, send him to see me at once. Let me know how you get on as I am rather anxious. You need not hurry to get back to your post."

And the secretary gave him a curt nod of dismissal.



Lord Lynton did not at all like the task that had been given to him, but there was no alternative save to obey, so he ordered his baggage to be put on a taxi-cab, and as he was about to step in, a newsboy thrust a paper into his hands.

*"Evenin' Comet, sir? All the news."*

Lord Lynton gave the boy a copper, and during the drive casually glanced at the paper, but suddenly an exclamation escaped him, and he proceeded to read a half column with the deepest attention.

"I think that it was about time I came home," he muttered savagely. And when he entered Gaunt's house there was a grim look on his face.

For a few minutes he waited in the hall until a glad cry was heard, and Lady Ethel ran towards him with outstretched arms.

"How glad I am to see you, Geoffrey," she cried, and gave him an affectionate embrace.

"Where is Mildred?" he asked quietly.

"With her husband. Come along to them," she said, and slipping her arm through his, drew him along.

Gaunt and his wife were sitting close together, and it was evident to Lord Lynton that they were on the best of terms. Lady Mildred's expression was that of a perfectly happy woman, and he thought how greatly she had improved. Her greeting was a quiet one, and then Gaunt came towards him with outstretched hand.

"Run away, girls; I want to have a business talk with Gaunt, and afterwards I shall be at your service," Lord Lynton said hurriedly, as he just touched his brother-in-law's hand.

"My husband has no secrets from me — isn't that so?"

Lady Mildred said quietly, turning to Gaunt with a smile.

"Do you wish her to remain?" the Earl asked coldly.

"It is as my wife wishes," Gaunt answered, and frankly met his brother-in-law's rather hostile look.

"You had better go, Ethel. I don't suppose we shall be very long."

"I suppose it is that wretched Congo again," Lady Ethel said petulantly, but she left the room.

"What is it?" Gaunt asked quietly, exchanging glances with his wife who had drawn closer and had slipped her hand into his.

"I really came to see you about this Congo foolishness, but there is something in to-night's paper that is of more consequence. Please read this paragraph, and you will understand why I am rather upset."

Gaunt took the paper, and his lips were firmly pressed together when he saw the head-lines.

*"A deal in Amanti Shares. Curious story at the Police Court."*

He rapidly mastered the statement which followed — the arrest of Davis at the instance of the Mining Company for having forged and despatched the cable, and the explicit statement that Julian Weiss and John Gaunt were the men who had planned the forgery. In counsel's short speech the facts were disclosed, and Gaunt realized that it was impossible to deny their accuracy.

Without saying a word, he handed the paper to Lady Mildred, and his eyes were fixed anxiously on her face as she read.

"I don't understand it," she said at last.

"It is simple. If this account is true, your husband

conspired with the Jewish financier, Weiss, to commit a gross fraud upon the public. Is that correct?" Lord Lynton demanded of Gaunt.

"Yes, it is quite right," was the quiet reply.

"And do you deny the charge that they make against you?"

"I do not recognize your right to question me," Gaunt answered coldly, but he was eagerly looking down at his wife, and her hand still rested in his.

"Perhaps I had better tell you the whole story," he began, addressing himself to Lady Mildred.

The facts were soon told, and he suppressed nothing except the vow that he had made, but when he spoke of the interview at which Edward Drake had been present, and the subsequent sending of the check to the King's Hospital Fund, the look of distress vanished from his wife's face.

"You did not benefit from it, John. Of course you were very wrong in the first place, but ——"

"Is that the way you look at it, Mildred? Then you have indeed changed," Lord Lynton cried harshly. "Cannot you understand that Gaunt has been found out in a dishonorable act? By this time all London will have read the report of the proceedings at the police court, and they will rightly call him a ——"

"Silence, Geoffrey!" she cried peremptorily, and her bosom rose and fell quickly. "Perhaps John may have done wrong, and I am sorry, but I do not intend to allow it to affect me. If you wish to remain friends you must be silent."

Lord Lynton gazed at his sister in wonder.

"Of course, Gaunt may be able to smooth the matter

over. It would be advisable to go to the Amanti people at once, and if necessary, pay them handsomely for withdrawing the charge. Then you can get a clever counsel to go to the police court, and say that it is all a mistake. It is only a question of money," he said with the idea of making the best of the situation.

"I intend to take no step at all, for I cannot deny its truth," Gaunt answered, and he felt his wife's hand tremble slightly.

Lord Lynton uttered an exclamation of anger, but quickly brought into play his diplomatic training.

"We will discuss it later on — with other matters," he remarked, and Lady Mildred gave a quick sigh of relief.



## CHAPTER XXVI

LADY MILDRED was dressed for dinner, and as it was rather early, she sat down in her own room, but very soon Gaunt came in. They had not spoken since the interview with her brother, and there were still traces of anxiety on his face.

"You were very good to stand up for me in the way you did, Mildred," he said earnestly. "Your brother was in the right, for it is a sordid business, and I greatly regret it."

"Say no more, John," she said gently, and drawing his face to hers, kissed him on the lips. "Perhaps it is true that women lose some of their ideas of morality when they love, for I cannot condemn you. I only know that I love you."

He took her in his arms, and there was a great yearning in his eyes, as he looked steadfastly at her.

"These last few hours have given me a glimpse of paradise, dearest. For your sake, I wish that I had been a better man. If I had met you years ago, I believe that I should have always been straight. At any rate, I can give you my word that there shall be nothing in my future to make you ashamed."

"I am sure of that, John. Promise me that you will be very patient with Geoffrey. He is impulsive and may say things that will hurt you."

"I will keep my temper for your sake. After all he has some reason on his side, for this scandal will naturally

reflect upon you, and indirectly upon himself. Now I think it is time to go down to dinner."

"One kiss, dearest."

And she placed her arms around his neck and drew him to her. And John was happy, in spite of the many dangers by which he was surrounded. There was only one thing that he feared — that she should become acquainted with the Marillier affair. Her present attitude assured him that she would forgive the exposure of any of the shady transactions in the City of which he had been guilty, but he realized that a charge of murder was a very different matter.

At dinner Lord Lynton made himself agreeable, and the conversation became animated, all taking part in it save John Gaunt, for he suspected the reason of his brother-in-law's unexpected journey from Paris, and he anticipated an unpleasant interview. However, it was not his way to postpone anything that was disagreeable, so when the ladies had left the room, he proposed that the Earl should accompany him to the library.

"I do not intend to talk about that Amanti business. I will be quite frank with you, Gaunt. I was sent for by the foreign secretary, and he wishes me to tell you that your present action of fanning this Congo agitation is causing him serious embarrassment," Lord Lynton said slowly and impressively.

"I can quite understand that he does not like it," Gaunt answered with a faint smile.

"The present moment is inopportune for the raising of any international question. It is impossible for us to do anything without Germany, and she thinks us incapable of any action for philanthropic motives. She im-

agines that we have an eye on the Congo Free State, and that if any partition should take place we shall, as usual, succeed in getting the lion's share."

"I do not think that we should allow Germany to dictate our policy. In other days England was wont to go her own way, and she was always eager to help the oppressed."

"We have already done everything in our power, for we have made urgent representations to the Belgian government."

"Representations are useless — a cruiser at the mouth of the Congo is the only effective argument," Gaunt answered drily.

"You will not try to understand our difficulties, and it is useless discussing the matter further. I want you to promise that you will do your utmost to stop this agitation. I presume that it is you that pay for these advertisements. May I ask why you are wasting your money in this way?"

"Surely that is my business. If I like to throw away my own money, it only concerns myself. On occasions I have given away large amounts, when there was no prospect of an adequate return."

The Earl's face flushed, and he rose to his feet.

"I suppose you intend to refer to myself. You were very generous, and the money came when I was hard pressed. I am very grateful to you for your kindness, but I shall begin to regret that I accepted any benefit at your hands."

"You are mistaken, Lynton. On my honor I was not thinking of you. The money I settled was on my wife's brother, and you are not under the slightest obligation

towards me. If you had not been Mildred's brother, I should have seen you damned before giving you a penny, so you may make your mind easy. I never professed to like you personally, for you always struck me as being one of those ultra-self-satisfied people, who are an offense to the mere ordinary person. One only has to look at you to know that you appreciate yourself at your full value—and a little over. Forgive my plain speech, but you rather brought it upon yourself."

Lord Lynton looked curiously at Gaunt, and knew not whether to resent this frankness; but he quickly remembered his mission, and forced a rather sickly smile to his face.

"It is a good thing to hear an opinion of oneself. But let us return to the Congo. I want you to promise to give up this crusade. It can't really mean very much to you, and you will be doing me a great favor. Naturally the foreign office know that you are my brother-in-law, and ——"

"They may think the less of you for possessing such an undesirable relative? I am afraid I can give you no such promise, for instead of relaxing my efforts, I intend to redouble them, until I force the government to intervene," Gaunt said, and the voice was grimly determined.

"Governments are not moved so easily, and you will only injure yourself."

"I have already done that, for I am pretty sure that the Belgians are responsible for the Amanti exposure."

"All the more reason why you should do as I ask," the Earl broke in quickly.

"Do I interrupt you?" Lady Mildred called from the doorway.



"No. Come in, for I don't think that your brother has much more to say," Gaunt answered.

"Yes, come in, Mildred, and help me to persuade your husband to be sensible," the Earl cried eagerly.

"What is it?" she asked, and sat on the arm of Gaunt's chair, allowing her hand to rest on his shoulder.

"Sir Keith Hamilton wants him to stop this Congo agitation, and he flatly refuses," Lord Lynton answered, and there was wonder in his voice that any one dare oppose the wishes of such an august official as the foreign secretary.

"I do not intend to interfere. John must decide for himself, and I shall be content with his decision," she answered quietly.

"You are a very dutiful wife, and a foolish woman. I did think that you would have more common sense, Mildred," he cried angrily; and then turned to Gaunt. "Is this your final decision?"

"Absolutely, and I keep my word," he answered quietly.

"Sir Keith must have anticipated this, for he said that if I were unsuccessful, I was to ask you to go and see him at the foreign office," the Earl said reluctantly, for his lack of success would be a reflection upon his diplomacy.

A smile came to Gaunt's face, and he looked at his wife as he answered.

"I fear that I must refuse Sir Keith's invitation. If he wants to see me, he must come here."

"The foreign secretary come to you!" the Earl cried in an amazed tone.

"Yes. But you may tell him that his visit will be a useless one."

"Gaunt, I don't understand you. I think you must be mad."

"Let us join the others," Lady Mildred cried hurriedly, for she saw a glint appear in her husband's eye, and she had no wish that they should quarrel.

"Very well, dear," Gaunt said with a laugh, and the Earl followed them slowly.

During the rest of the evening there was no further reference to the subject, but Gaunt now and then caught Lord Lynton looking at him with a curious expression in his eyes.

In the morning the two men met in the library where the Earl was surrounded by the morning papers, most of which bore evidence of having been impatiently thrown aside.

"Gaunt, you must do something. The papers are making a feature of this Amanti business, and it ought to be stopped. Get your lawyer man to threaten them with a libel action."

"For telling the truth. No, I intend to let them go their own way."

"It is scandalous," the Earl cried hotly, but Gaunt only smiled. In fact he had just left his wife and could still feel her kiss upon his lips, so these troubles were things that did not matter.

When Edward Drake came in, the Earl at once tackled him.

"I understand, sir, that you are Gaunt's adviser?"

"Why do you say that?" Drake asked quickly.

"He has probably been talking to Lady Ethel," Gaunt answered quickly.

"If you have any influence with Mr. Gaunt, pray in-

duce him to reconsider his decision. As his near relative, I wish him to do two things—to stamp out these vermin who are attacking him, and to cease this Congo agitation. Don't you agree with me that I am only reasonable?" the Earl asked warmly.

"No. I know the whole facts of the Amanti business. Gaunt did wrong, and he must suffer for his wrongdoing. As to the Congo, he would dishonor himself if he turned back," Drake answered quietly.

"You speak as a clergyman?" the Earl cried angrily.

"I speak as a Christian and a man. May I suggest that you allow Mr. Gaunt to manage his own affairs? For I assure you that he is quite capable of doing so."

Lord Lynton plainly showed his annoyance.

"Gaunt—I am now going to the foreign office," he said curtly.

"You may convey my answer to the foreign secretary."

Lord Lynton left the room, as he did not wish to lose his temper, for he knew that he was a match for neither of these strong, self-contained men.

"His lordship is angry," Drake said with a smile.

"And has reason to be, if you look at it from his point of view. Have you seen the morning papers?" Gaunt asked casually.

"Yes, and I am sorry that this thing has come out at the present moment. I suppose there can be no doubt that the Baron is behind it?"

"No doubt at all, and they will probably work the trial so that I am subpoenaed to attend. It might even be possible to get Weiss and myself in the dock on a charge of conspiracy. However, I am prepared for any development."

"You are not afraid?"

"Of nothing, for I have my wife's confidence—and her love," he added so quietly that Drake could scarcely catch the words.

However, he understood and he placed his hand on Gaunt's shoulder.

"I am very glad, and have only one regret," he said in a low voice.

"What is that?"

"That you did not tell your wife everything. She is a noble woman and large-minded enough to have forgiven, if you had confessed. But if she finds out from any one else——"

"I won't think it possible," Gaunt cried passionately, and there was horror in his eyes.



## CHAPTER XXVII

LORD LYNTON did not look forward to his interview with Sir Keith Hamilton, but there was nothing to be gained by postponement, for he was satisfied that there was no chance of being able to persuade Gaunt to change his mind. Accordingly he went to the foreign office at once, and was admitted into the presence of his chief.

"Have you been successful?" the latter asked quickly.

"No, sir. Mr. Gaunt absolutely refused to cease this agitation. It is needless to say that I spared no effort to get him to fall in with your wishes, but he is quite obstinate. He is an extremely difficult man to handle," the Earl said apologetically.

"So I should imagine. Please tell me everything that took place. Pray be as accurate as possible."

And Lord Lynton proceeded to relate in detail their conversation, while the foreign secretary listened attentively.

"A strong man, your brother-in-law. I must see what I can do with him. When is he coming here?"

"I regret to say that he refuses to come at all," the Earl answered hesitatingly.

"Ah, that is serious, for it sounds like a declaration of war," the minister said slowly.

"He intimated that if you wished to see him you would find him at Gaunt House. I am very sorry that I have not been more successful, sir."

"So am I," Sir Keith answered drily, and then lapsed into silence.

The Earl fidgeted in his chair, for he began to imagine that his presence had been forgotten, but suddenly he felt a pair of piercing gray eyes turned towards him.

"You had better remain in London for the present. Are you staying with Mr. Gaunt?"

"Yes, sir."

"Remain there, for you may be useful. Just one question, and it is rather a delicate one. What attitude does Lady Mildred take up? Of course you spoke to her on the subject?"

"Yes, and I am sorry to say that she backs up her husband. She seems to have changed a good deal since her marriage."

"Gaunt is evidently a man with a personality, and I shall be interested to meet him."

"You intend to go to his house?" the Earl cried in surprise.

"Yes, but there is no necessity to mention my intention to Gaunt."

A secretary had entered and placed a piece of paper before Sir Keith.

"Yes, I will see the Baron, but not until I ring. Good-evening, my lord. Please keep in constant touch with the office," the latter remarked to the Earl, who then left the room.

When the door was closed, Sir Keith rose and began to pace to and fro. It was evident that he was thinking deeply, and now one could see that the first impression of youth was false, for there were deep lines on his clean shaven face, and the hair near his temples was turning gray.

Then he took up a précis which told him of the latest developments in the Congo agitation, and his brows became puckered into a frown as he read.

"This man must be stopped. Now we will see what the Baron has to say," he muttered irritably, and then touched the button of the electric bell.

The two men were old acquaintances, and had a mutual respect for one another's ability. The Baron possessed an advantage for he knew that Sir Keith was a straightforward gentleman, and incapable of chicanery and underhand dealing.

"I expected you before this, Baron. You have been in London some few days," the minister remarked, as he returned the Belgian's elaborate bow.

"Yes, your Excellency, but I have had very much to occupy my time. Pray forgive the delay in paying my call," the Baron answered politely.

"It is not difficult to guess what has occupied you. For one word — Gaunt?"

"Your guess is a shrewd one; and in this case I think our interests are identical. Do you not agree with me?"

"It depends where your interests lie?"

"It is evident—in stopping Gaunt from raising this clamor. It is not necessary for us to discuss the international situation, for you know it better than I do. It suffices to say that this agitation is against your interests and ours."

"I do not know that it affects my government very greatly, but I can quite understand that you would object to this exposure. Why not remedy the state of affairs in the Congo, for sooner or later you will have to do so?" Sir Keith said significantly.

"We are doing our utmost to improve the status of the natives, but these things cannot be done in a moment," the Baron expostulated.

"That is the official voice that speaks. Unofficially I tell you that the treatment of the natives is as bad as ever it was, and you know it. But it is useless discussing that; I will drop you a friendly hint. You are reaching the end of your tether."

Sir Keith spoke very seriously, and his eyes did not leave the Baron's face.

"Of course you are speaking unofficially," the latter said quietly.

"Quite so," Sir Keith rejoined drily; "and now may I know what I can do for you?"

"Close the mouth of this man, Gaunt."

"That is not an easy matter. England is a free country, and prides itself upon its freedom of speech. So far Gaunt has not given us any grounds for interference."

"But the agitation is increasing by leaps and bounds. The situation may become dangerous."

"You are afraid that His Majesty's government may be forced by the clamor to intervene in the Congo. Put an end to the abuses and you will have no cause for anxiety. I regret that I cannot help you, Baron."

Sir Keith rose to terminate the interview, but De Croiseuil made no sign of going.

"A word from you to Gaunt would make him stop," he said doggedly.

"This is not Belgium. An official, however high he may be, is not such an exalted person as in your country. Good-morning, Baron," Sir Keith said decidedly.



"I shall esteem it a favor if you will glance through these papers. I see that you are a busy man, and I will call again for your opinion. I have the honor of wishing good-day to your Excellency."

And the Baron, having placed a large envelope on the table, bowed himself from the room. The foreign secretary took out the papers, and it was evident that his interest was aroused from the outset, for he read on till he had thoroughly mastered each document. This done he left the office and walked rapidly to his club, where he ate a frugal lunch, and afterwards went to the smoking-room.

"The Baron's little game is very clever, but will it succeed?"

He asked himself the question but could come to no decision.

"Perhaps an interview with Gaunt will give me the answer," he said musingly and having finished his cigar, he started walking rapidly to Park Lane.

None recognized him save a policeman, for he was a man who loathed advertisement, and considered that he was most successful as a foreign secretary when his name was least in evidence. By the time he reached Gaunt's house, his mind was made up as to the course he should take at the coming interview.

There was a few minutes' wait in the hall, and he noticed with approval the quiet taste with which the place was furnished.

"Evidently Lady Mildred was consulted," was the thought, but in this he was wrong, for Gaunt had chosen everything, even before he had dreamt of marriage.

To his knowledge Sir Keith had never seen the

millionaire, and so he looked with keen interest at the man who greeted him, noting the strong face and air of self-reliance.

"The mountain would not come to Mahomet—— But I am afraid that quotation is inappropriate, for I certainly am no prophet, Mr. Gaunt. May I sit down?"

Sir Keith had held out his hand, and felt Gaunt's steady grip.

"There is nothing flabby in this man's nature," was his thought, and he braced himself up for a battle.

He sank back luxuriously in the big armchair, while Gaunt brought a box of cigars.

"Will you smoke, sir?" he asked quietly.

"Thank you. I suppose you know what I have come about. It was very good of you to invite me to your house. Quite a pleasant change from my office. This room is very restful; and if I were a rich man I should choose just such a place. Ah, I see you have excellent taste in books. Isn't that a Caxton?"

"Don't you think we had better get our business over, and then the library is at your service," Gaunt answered, and the respectful tone removed any suspicion of rudeness.

Sir Keith gave him a quick glance, for he was not accustomed to be answered quite in this way. It was usually his rôle to lead a conversation.

"I will be frank and blunt. Why are you carrying on this insane crusade? You can do no good to the natives of the Congo, and you will only injure yourself. In addition, it is very embarrassing to me as foreign secretary, for I tell you it is utterly impossible to do anything more than I have done. Perhaps in a few months' time

the political atmosphere will have cleared, and then we may be able to do more than make representations to the Belgian government. I may say that, as a private individual, I sympathize with all you are doing. In the past the conduct of the Congo officials has been diabolical, and according to the evidence which I have been receiving up to the last week or so, they are not improving matters. I read your first speech, and I agree with you that the Belgians intend to exploit the Congo until they have exhausted the country. I agree with you that there is no faith to be placed in their promises of reform, and that their present budget proves them to be liars. This is said in confidence, as man to man. I believe I have the reputation of not being callous or hard-hearted, and if it were possible I would intervene at once. But I tell you solemnly and sincerely that at present we can go no farther than to make representations. You are only considering the Congo. I must think of the well-being of the British Empire. The present is a time of great danger, for a spark might start a war which would appal mankind. It is my duty to avoid every possibility of causing a spark. It is my opinion that if we intervene by force, there would be danger of war with another country, and I dare not run the risk. I am not usually a man of many words, but I have spoken at such length so that you may fully understand my position. Now I ask you to cease this public outcry."

Sir Keith had risen, and stood face to face with Gaunt. Their eyes met, and for a while neither spoke. At last the foreign secretary uttered a little sigh and turned away.

"And that answer is final?" he asked wearily, although Gaunt had not spoken.



"Absolutely. I thank you for coming to see me. I thought you to be a very different man, and I now see that it was a petty act—my refusal to go to you. Pray forgive me."

"I, too, was mistaken in you, Mr. Gaunt. Whatever may be your motive, I do not think it is an unworthy one. It is a pity that your life has not been different. England can do with such men as yourself. Good-bye."

Again the two men eyed one another steadily.

"I won't insult you by pressing you to change your mind."

Sir Keith sighed once more, and now his face seemed to have aged.

"By the bye, I must warn you of one thing. We have not mentioned the Baron de Croiseuil, but you have probably realized that he is your bitterest enemy. I don't think I shall be betraying a confidence, if I tell you that an application will be made at Bow Street at once. It concerns the death on the Congo of a man named Marillier, and proceedings will be taken for your extradition to that country on a charge of murder."

Gaunt's face was set, and his mouth was drawn into a grim line, but he did not falter.

"It was a kindness to tell me," he said quietly.

Sir Keith Hamilton gave Gaunt a glance of admiration and then continued deprecatingly:

"It is evident that this summons for extradition is a move upon the part of the Baron de Croiseuil to discredit you, and I assure you that he will not have my support," he said with quiet emphasis.

"It is very good of you to tell me this, sir, espe-



cially after the attitude I have taken up," Gaunt answered earnestly.

"I don't profess to understand your motive for stirring up this agitation, and I don't ask for your confidence, but ——"

He paused expressively, and there was an expression of inquiry on his face. Gaunt knew not what to say, for how could he give his real motive — the vow? And that was not the sole reason, for now he was animated by a keen desire to defeat those who were attacking him so spitefully. His love of fighting had been raised to fever-heat, and yet he could not explain those mingled feelings to the foreign secretary.

"I do not fear this police court business, sir. But I thank you for your kindness. Will you answer me one question frankly?"

"Yes," Sir Keith answered with a friendly smile, for he felt greatly drawn to this man and would gladly have helped him in any way that was possible.

"However great becomes this agitation for reform in the Congo, however great pressure is brought to bear upon you as foreign secretary, shall you stick to what you have just told me, namely, that you will go no further than making representations to the Belgian government?" Gaunt asked earnestly.

"That is as far as I intend to go, unless there is a very material alteration in the international position in Europe."

"Which isn't likely!"

"Which is very improbable. And now I hope that you will give me the assurance for which I have asked."

"I regret that it is impossible, but believe me, Sir Keith, that I shall always be grateful to you for the consideration you have shown me to-day. If, in the future, I am fated to act contrary to your wishes and in a way that you will condemn, I ask you to think of me as leniently as possible," Gaunt said, and his voice shook a little.

"I don't know at what you are hinting, Mr. Gaunt; but when this Congo agitation is forgotten I can only say that I should like to know you. It seems to me that we have many interests in common. May I look round your shelves? I still have an hour to spare," Sir Keith said genially.

And Gaunt proceeded to point out his treasures, and the talk became animated, as they discussed the beauties of some of the rare volumes. The Shakespeare folios came in for great attention, and Sir Keith was frankly envious.

"What it is to be a poor man when money will buy such things as these," he said with a sigh.

While they were in the midst of their engrossing talk Lady Mildred came in, for she had been made anxious by their long conference. Tea was served and Sir Keith showed her great attention, but all the time he was studying the husband and wife, and soon came to the conclusion that they loved one another. For a moment he was tempted to try to use Lady Mildred in a last attempt to influence Gaunt, but quickly the idea was dismissed as an unworthy one. And at last he rose.

"I hope to be able to follow up this meeting with your husband, if he will allow me to do so," he said to her pleasantly, and that was the only occasion on which

he made a remark that might have been construed as a reference to the Congo question.

When he had gone Gaunt turned to his wife and spoke with deep earnestness.

"That is a man, Mildred, and I hate to have to fight against him. But ——"

He broke off, for her arms were round him and she kissed him passionately.

"No stupid politics, an you love me," she whispered.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

**G**AUNT understood that Sir Keith was not bluffing in what he had said, and this knowledge made a complete change in his plans. After dinner he summoned Edward Drake and his brother to the library, and proceeded to inform them of what had taken place, but did not mention the Marillier affair. Lady Mildred came in soon after he had begun to speak and she drew back when she saw them so deeply engaged.

"Drake, I wondered if we might take Lady Mildred into our confidence?" Gaunt asked abruptly.

Edward Drake did not answer at once, for he saw danger ahead. As a matter of fact Gaunt had spoken upon the impulse of the moment — a rare occurrence — and now it was difficult to draw back. Indeed, Lady Mildred did not give him an opportunity for she drew a chair close to her husband.

"Although I am a woman I can keep a secret," she said reproachfully to Edward Drake, and he flushed a little but made no reply.

"To understand, Mildred, you must first realize that Mr. Drake and myself have vowed," he flushed as he spoke the word, "have vowed to help the natives of the Congo whatever may be the cost to ourselves."

"Mr. Gaunt may also count me as having made the same vow," Lindsay Drake broke in eagerly.



"From my interview with the foreign secretary, I am convinced that there can be no help from the British government, however great the agitation may become. That being so we must fall back upon the plan we mentioned some time ago, and there must be no time lost in putting it into execution," Gaunt said slowly and expressively.

"You mean the 'cruiser' scheme," Lindsay Drake cried, and his eyes were alight with excitement.

"Yes, and I have ascertained that at the present moment there is a small cruiser undergoing her trials. She was built on the Tyne for the San Salvador Republic and is the very ship for us, especially as the San Salvador finances are in a bad state, and they are hard pushed to find money. Our first step is to begin negotiations with the San Salvador representatives, and I think that they will jump at the idea, so that we ought to be able to hire the cruiser at a reasonable price. It is important that my name shall not appear in the negotiations for I anticipate that the Baron will be closely watching my every movement. My difficulty is to find a man to conduct this negotiation."

"I will do it," Lindsay Drake cried quickly.

"You hold a commission in the army. It may be dangerous work," Gaunt answered.

"I am willing to run the risk."

"I think I am the more suitable person in every way," Edward Drake intervened.

"I agree with you," Gaunt answered, "for I have other work for your brother. The engineers and artificers will be easily found, for we are willing to pay them well. But the other men will require careful selection.

We shall want a number of men with military training, and can you find them? They must not be 'wasters,' and they must be able to hold their tongues. My present idea is that these men should concentrate at the Canary Islands where the cruiser could pick them up. Can I leave this part of the business in your hands?" Gaunt asked of Captain Drake.

"Yes, I think I can manage it. At the present moment I know dozens of men — gentlemen — who would be keen at the chance of going with us, just for the fun of the thing. I am one of them," the latter answered.

"It is a mad idea," Lady Mildred cried vehemently, "and a dangerous one. Should you go on the cruiser?" she asked with a look of anxiety at her husband.

"I could not very well let the others go and stay at home," Gaunt answered with a smile. "At first, the scheme may seem a little mad, but if you look into it you will see that it is quite feasible. As soon as we leave the Canary Islands we shall be all right. The danger is that our plans may be discovered before we can get away. There is that wretched Foreign Enlistment Act."

"I am sure I can get the right sort of men who won't blab," Lindsay Drake said confidently.

They proceeded to discuss their plans in detail, and it was decided that negotiations should be commenced the next day for the hiring of the cruiser. Lady Mildred did not interrupt them and upon realizing that their talk was likely to be a prolonged one, she rose, and bade them good-night.

Captain Drake was the next to depart for he expected Gaunt and his brother wished to be alone, and in this he

was right. But there was silence for some time after he had gone, until Gaunt began to tell of his interview with the foreign secretary which concerned the Marillier affair.

"And there can be no doubt that the Baron will carry out his threat," he wound up.

"He is a dangerous enemy, and the terrible part is that we can do nothing. Do you think that the magistrate would be likely to send you to the Congo for trial?" Drake asked in a low voice.

"It is extremely unlikely, for I don't see how they can get the evidence. Indeed, I am not certain that the Baron expects to succeed. He merely wishes to blacken my character and close my mouth. There is the Amanti deal and this coming on the top of it will be likely to make the public believe that I am not the kind of man who would be interested in the Congo, merely out of consideration for the welfare of the natives. And the public would have been right in thinking that a little time ago. In fact I myself find it difficult to know what is my real motive. A good deal to do with it is a natural love of a fight."

"You are not just to yourself, for I am convinced that you are as desirous as I am to help the natives. Don't think me impertinent if I say that I have noticed changes in your character. When we first met you were a hard man and devoid of human sympathy. You have allowed me to see something of the real Gaunt and I understand the reason of your change. But do you think you were wise to let your wife know of our plans?" Drake asked quietly.

"Why do you ask that question?" Gaunt cried impatiently.



"Remember her first remark. She wished to know if you yourself would go. Naturally she imagines that there would be danger in such an expedition and she loves you; need I say more?"

"My wife will not try to persuade me to stay at home," Gaunt answered grimly.

"I am not so sure of that."

"We won't discuss it," Gaunt broke in quickly. "Last night I did not sleep very well and in my mind I went over everything I had done since we first met. Tell me honestly, have I so far carried out my vow?"

"Yes. You have done as much as mortal man could do. I have been afraid, at times, that you had lost sight of that motive, and were acting from a wish to get the better of the Baron. May I tell you what is in my mind?" Drake asked hesitatingly.

"I prefer absolute frankness."

"I have been afraid that now you have won your wife's love you would weaken in your purpose. You have obtained all that you desired, and I thought that the temptation to enjoy your happiness would be too great."

"I have been tempted, Drake, but I am not that sort of man. I made a bargain and will carry it out faithfully."

"And if Lady Mildred tries to persuade you to give it up?" Drake persisted.

"I said before that she will not do so. If she does, it will make no difference."

"But already you have given in, for you had determined that you would not try to win your wife until you could go to her with clean hands."

Gaunt's face flushed at the rebuke, for he could not



deny its justice, and it was impossible to explain that he had made no effort to win Lady Mildred, so he remained silent.

"I have a presentiment that misfortune is near at hand. Gaunt, won't you go to your wife and tell her of that other thing? It seems to me that you have gained her love under false pretenses," Drake continued in a low voice.

Gaunt rose from his chair and uttered an exclamation of anger.

"Drake, you are going too far," he cried vehemently, for the accusation had struck home.

"I only wish to save you from great trouble, and it is not an easy task to say these things for I recognize what a hard task I am setting you. Remember your vow — you promised that your future life should be lived in accordance with the teaching of Christ. It was an almost superhuman task that you set yourself, for you lacked belief in the love of Christ and the Christian spirit which alone could give you the strength to carry out your determination. Don't think I want to preach to you, Gaunt, but I fear that you will fail, unless you force yourself to regard everything from a different point of view. You told me that you believe that God had given you your wife's life in answer to your prayer. Do you still believe that?" Drake asked gently.

"Yes."

There was a strained look in Gaunt's eyes as he whispered the single word.

"Then you must believe in the efficacy of prayer. Ask God to give you the strength to make a complete confession to Lady Mildred."

"I cannot do it," Gaunt answered miserably.

Drake sighed wearily and rising stood face to face with the man, whom he longed so intensely to help.

"God did not fail you when you prayed in desperation. Go to Him again."

The words were spoken with deep earnestness and Gaunt was moved, but there was ever before him the fear of the distress that would come into his wife's eyes, when she should hear his miserable story.

"Shall I tell her for you?" Drake insisted quietly.

"No, no!" was the vehement answer. "I am not such an abject coward."

Gaunt turned away with a groan and began to pace restlessly to and fro, while Drake's eyes followed him, filled with eager expectation. It was some time before either of them spoke but at last Gaunt stopped suddenly.

"I will not make you a promise which I may not be able to fulfil, but I will think it over," he said with a roughness that was intended to hide his weakness.

After a tight grip of the hands the men parted, and Gaunt went straight to his wife's room, for he felt sure that she had not gone to bed.

In fact Lady Mildred had been anxiously awaiting him for she wished to talk over with him the scheme which had been unfolded in her presence, but at the sight of his white face she quickly determined to postpone the discussion. Gaunt was surprised at her silence upon the subject, but their love was a new and very precious thing, and as they sat before the fire his indecision vanished.

They were both supremely happy, and their eyes would meet, brimming over with the love that they found so

strangely sweet. And Gaunt knew that he would never have the courage to jeopardize all that made life worth the living.

Her upbringing was such a one as would cause her to regard with horror the shedding of blood, and she would not be able to understand how it had happened. Then, too, there were such sordid surroundings, which it would be impossible for him to explain.

When she left him he sat there for a while, and his thoughts were not pleasant, for it was impossible to conceal from himself that he was not honestly carrying out his vow. Drake's words had disturbed him, and he found it difficult to quiet his awakened conscience.

At last he went to his dressing-room and threw off his coat, but his actions were very slow, and now and then he would stop and stand still with a frown on his face.

When he had finished undressing a sudden impulse seized him, and he sank on to his knees beside the bed. Words would not come and still he did not move. His eyes were closed, and his quick breathing could be heard.

The door opened quietly, and Lady Mildred stood in the doorway, a look of surprise springing to her face. But she uttered no word, and left as silently as she had entered, and Gaunt wrestled with himself.

## CHAPTER XXIX

**B**ARON DE CROISEUIL had half expected to hear from Gaunt, for he imagined that the papers which he had left with Sir Keith Hamilton might have caused that gentleman to communicate with the millionaire, with the idea of persuading him into silence. A couple of days passed and it was very evident that something must be done without delay, and the Baron reluctantly decided to cause an application to be made at Bow Street to secure a warrant for Gaunt's arrest. By this time numerous documents had arrived from Brussels, and among them were affidavits sufficiently strong to make out a *prima facie* case of murder. There were numberless ex-Congo officials in Belgium who would be prepared to swear to anything for a consideration, for their morals were warped, and their greed for gold insatiable.

So the Baron interviewed Mr. Simon Stone—the notorious solicitor, who was engaged in every case where dirty work was required to be done skillfully, and gave him full instructions. But as he walked back to his hotel, De Croiseuil was not altogether satisfied with what he had done, for he knew that his case was a weak one, and that the arrest of John Gaunt would cause a great outcry. But it was not his wish to proceed to that extremity, and as he strolled along Piccadilly, he saw approaching a gentleman, at the sight of whom he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.



"It is really a pleasure to see you. I did not know you were in London," he began effusively.

Lord Lynton, for it was he, did not at first recognize the Baron, for it was some time since they had met, but recollection came at last.

"You are looking very fit," he remarked politely.

"Will you not come as far as the Ritz with me? It is just time for déjeuner, and you are the very man I wanted to see."

The Earl hesitated, and the Baron continued quickly.

"It concerns your brother-in-law, Mr. Gaunt. For the sake of your family, I ask you to come," he wound up earnestly.

Lord Lynton no longer hesitated, and the two men hastened along in silence, but as soon as they had entered the sitting-room, the Baron's face grew very grave.

"It was fortunate that we met, as your lordship may prevent something very like a tragedy from taking place. But we will not talk till we have eaten," he said, and ringing the bell, ordered that lunch should be served immediately.

The meal was short but excellent and the Baron did justice to it, but the Earl was evidently occupied with his thoughts, which were the reverse of pleasant. To do him justice, he had ceased to consider himself, although it was very unpleasant to read each day the attacks upon the man who was his brother-in-law. But Lady Mildred must be protected and he remembered that Gaunt had been confident that the Baron was responsible for the articles appearing against him in the newspapers.

"What is this tragedy of which you speak?" he asked as they lighted their cigarettes.

"First of all, I want you to bear in mind that I am only doing my duty. I have a great admiration for Mr. Gaunt, and I deeply regret the necessity of harming him. You are aware of what has happened, and so it is unnecessary to weary you with details. You know that he has turned on his old friends in a scandalous manner, and is raising a bitter but unjustified feeling against my country. May I ask a question? Have you come to England owing to this?"

"Yes," the Earl answered quietly.

"Ah! I thought I could trace the cunning hand of my friend Sir Keith. But I fear you have been unsuccessful in your mission. Gaunt is terribly obstinate. May I ask if Sir Keith mentioned *l'affaire Marillier*?"

"No. This is the first I have heard of it."

"It is a most deplorable business, but I think that it is as well that you should know, for it concerns Mr. Gaunt. I will be very short, and simply say that Marillier was one of our officials who met with an untimely end, for he was shot by a brother official. In fact he was murdered, and the man who killed him was John Gaunt," the Baron said quietly.

Lord Lynton rose to his feet, and looked down at the Belgian in blank amazement.

"You are accusing Mr. Gaunt of murder?" he cried harshly.

"Yes, it is very unfortunate, and I am greatly distressed, especially as I have this morning given instructions that an application shall be made for a warrant for his arrest. Pray believe that I hated having to do this, but *helas*, I am but a subordinate, and I am compelled to obey orders."

"This affair must have happened many years ago. May I ask you why you have only just thought of taking proceedings?"

The Baron did not answer, but shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Your motive is quite clear. You have no hope that he will be found guilty, but you think that by this means you will discredit him. Baron, your conduct is in keeping with your other actions in the Congo. It is a knavish trick," the Earl cried contemptuously.

"It is unwise to insult me, whose only wish is to be your friend. We will not discuss the ethics of the matter, but I will hint that these proceedings may be still stopped by a simple promise."

"I understand. You wish me to tell Gaunt that if he will shut up, you are willing to drop *l'affaire Marillier*."

"Precisely, and I am sure that you will appreciate which way Gaunt's interests lie. There is also his wife, Lady Mildred, to be considered. You are her brother, and surely you have the right to speak forcibly. If you succeed, not only will you be doing me a favor but——"

"I have not the slightest wish to do you a favor," the Earl cried contemptuously.

"It matters not, so long as you bring about the desired end. I was about to say that you will also be pleasing Sir Keith Hamilton. Perhaps this fact will appeal to you," the Baron said drily.

"Do you say that you have actually given the lawyer instructions to apply for a warrant?" the Earl demanded abruptly.

"Yes. A few hours ago."

"Then there is no time to be lost. I presume that you have the power of stopping the proceedings if Gaunt submits to what you want?"

"Yes. Extradition matters are different from your criminal law. All you need do is to 'phone me that Mr. Gaunt has become reasonable, and I will see to the rest. You are going, my lord. Then I will wait here till I hear from you."

The two men exchanged bows, and Lord Lynton hurried to the door, where he was fortunate enough to get a taxi-cab without any delay. He had seen but little of John Gaunt, for his brother-in-law had been very busy, and had been away each day until dinner time, so that he was not very hopeful of finding him at Park Lane.

"Is your master in?" he demanded of the footman who answered the ring.

"Yes, my lord. He is with her ladyship, in her ladyship's room."

The Earl ran rapidly up the stairs, and found Gaunt and Lady Mildred engaged in admiring the baby. In fact they were laughing heartily as they watched the infant's lusty kicks.

"Gaunt, I want a word with you. Will you come to the library?" Lord Lynton said almost curtly, and Lady Mildred gave him a quick look of curiosity.

She rang the bell for the nurse, and then rested her hand on her husband's arm.

"I will come with you. Geoffrey, you look very tragic," she remarked lightly.

But he was not in the mood for bandying words, and his lips were tightly pressed together as he faced them.



"Mildred, you appear to enjoy your husband's confidence. Has he told you of the Marillier business?" he asked coldly.

"No. What is it? But don't answer, for John may not wish me to know," she added quickly.

For the moment Gaunt was tempted to seize this loophole and escape, but only for a moment. He could still feel her hand resting on his arm, so very gently he disengaged it.

"You have the right to know, but you should have heard it from me, coward that I am," he muttered hoarsely.

And he blamed himself bitterly for his weakness. What a fool he had been in not following Edward Drake's advice.

His words drove the color from Lady Mildred's face, for she realized that she was about to hear something that might affect the happiness which these last few days had been well-nigh perfect. And instinctively she drew closer to the man whom she had grown to love so passionately.

"I have just come from the Baron de Croiseuil, and he tells me that a warrant is about to be issued for your arrest," the Earl announced bluntly.

The sight of his sister's evident love had driven away every feeling of compassion, and he wished to hurt this stern-faced man. But in his desire, Lady Mildred had been forgotten, and she uttered a cry that wrung his heart with its pain.

"What does it mean, John? Why should they wish to arrest you? What have you done?" she cried breathlessly, and her bosom rose and fell quickly.

Gaunt took her hand in his and there was a great pity in his eyes.

"Mildred, I killed a man, and ——"

"The charge is one of murder," the Earl interrupted brutally.

To do him justice, it was with a good motive, that of thoroughly frightening his sister, so that she would compel Gaunt to give way.

"It cannot be more than manslaughter. I killed a man but it was in self-defense. Mildred, let me tell you the whole story," said Gaunt, and his voice was low with a note of anguish.

"There is no time for that. I tell you that the warrant for your arrest may already be issued, but there is a way to prevent all this trouble. Give me your word that this Congo agitation shall end, and you will hear no more of it," the Earl said slowly and emphatically.

Lady Mildred turned to her husband with a glad cry.

"Surely you will do that, John? Think what it means. Although you are innocent, they will drag you to prison, and — I cannot think of it. Why do you hesitate, John dearest? Look at me. I love you, John, and you cannot be so cruel. They will take you from me and — Geoffrey, go to the Baron at once. Tell him that John consents," she cried vehemently.

And John Gaunt struggled with the great temptation of his life.

"Mildred, you do not turn from me because I killed this man?" he asked eagerly.

"No, no, John. But send Geoffrey. Tell him to go."

Gaunt's face had brightened wonderfully, and he no longer hesitated.

"Stay," he cried to the Earl, who had reached the door.

The latter turned with a look of inquiry on his face. But he had no doubt that he had won.

"You will not go to the Baron. Let him do his worst," Gaunt said quietly.

"John, you cannot mean it. By our love I implore you to give way. I will bless you till my dying day. Think of the baby. Think of me, dearest. They will take you to prison — you, my husband. I cannot bear it, John."

She sank back into a chair and covered her face with her hands, sobbing passionately.

"You cannot hesitate," the Earl said harshly.

A knock at the door and Edward Drake entered.

"Gaunt, there is an inspector of police below. He wishes to see you," he announced, and there was deep sympathy on his face.

"Mr. Drake, you have influence with my husband. He only has to send word to the Baron and the proceedings will be stopped," Lady Mildred cried imploringly. "I know that you do not like me, but you are my husband's friend. Advise him to consent."

In her anguish Lady Mildred had clasped Drake's hands and he stood there motionless, with his eyes fixed on Gaunt.

"Mr. Gaunt will do what he thinks to be right," he said, and his voice shook with emotion.

"John, do you still hesitate?" she cried piteously. "You owe me something. I have given you all the love

of which I am capable. I have been generous, for I have sunk my pride, and I will do so again for your happiness. Speak to me, dearest."

"I cannot give the Baron the promise he requires," Gaunt said, and the fierce attempt to crush down his emotion made his voice sound hard in his wife's ears.

With a cry she came towards him, and all appeal had left her face.

"If you will not do this for me, then I swear that I will never forgive you. Your love is a pretense." She turned suddenly to Drake. "It is your fault. It is you who make my husband act in this way. Undo your work or I can make you suffer, for I know that you care for my sister."

But as she looked from Drake to her husband, she knew that it was hopeless, and with a cry of anguish she fell back into her brother's arms. Gaunt sprang forward, kissed her tenderly, and without looking back strode from the room.

"Curse the vow," he said savagely to Drake, who accompanied him.

The inspector had awaited him in the library and he came forward.

"Mr. Gaunt, I hold a warrant for your arrest," he said respectfully.

"I am ready," Gaunt answered quietly.

And the inspector proceeded to read the warrant, but he was quickly interrupted.

"I understand the charge," Gaunt cried impatiently. "Do you wish to handcuff me?"

"No, sir. I have a taxi-cab at the door."

"Shall I come with you?" Drake asked quietly:



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"No, stay and try to comfort my wife. In the meantime see that none of our plans are delayed. You and your brother have full instructions," Gaunt said quietly.

## CHAPTER XXX

**D**URING the drive to Bow Street Police Station, John Gaunt could think of nothing else save his wife's attitude, and it was with a deep feeling of relief that he realized his fear had been groundless. It was not the fact that he had killed Marillier that had caused her distress, but the danger that he was incurring. She had appealed to him so passionately, inasmuch as she feared for his safety, and the thought brought him comfort.

The warrant was formally read over to him in the charge room and he was at once conducted to a cell, there to await the arrival of his solicitor, for whom he had sent. He was calm and collected when the lawyer arrived.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Stanley," he remarked quietly, and then proceeded to relate what had happened.

The solicitor listened attentively, now and then jotting down a note.

"Mr. Gaunt, the best thing you can do is to make terms with the Baron de Croiseuil," Mr. Stanley said when the story was finished.

"You may dismiss that idea from your mind. I intend to fight him," Gaunt answered sternly.

"I see," the solicitor remarked reflectively. "Of course you are in no great danger, for it is unlikely that

they will convict you after the long delay ; but you will certainly have to put up with a great deal of inconvenience. I must get away at once, for I should like Sir Richard Tester to have his brief to-night."

"You think that he is the best man?"

"Undoubtedly, for he is so ultra-respectable. Mark my words, the other side will have Lester Ruggles. Good-bye, Mr. Gaunt, and don't worry too much. You are quite sure you won't make terms with the Baron?"

"Quite. Good-bye," Gaunt answered laconically.

The cell was not entirely without comfort, and he settled himself down to wait for the morning. Try as he would he could not prevent himself from thinking of Lady Mildred, and he wondered how this wretched business would affect their relations. However, he told himself that her love would rise above worldly considerations and that, when he was free, she would receive him with open arms.

At last he fell asleep, and it was late when he awakened. Mr. Stanley arrived soon after ten o'clock and proceeded to question him closely. He then hurried away to embody the information he had received in the brief.

It was not until twelve o'clock that a policeman came and announced that the magistrate, Sir William Chandler, had arrived and that his attendance was required.

Gaunt's face was rather pale, but his expression was calm when he entered the crowded court. All eyes were turned upon him, and the pencils of the press men became busy as he stood in the dock and bowed to the magistrate.

The charge was read by the clerk, and Mr. Lester

Ruggles, K. C., rose to his feet. He was a barrister of some fame and, like the solicitor who instructed him, was retained in cases which counsel of better repute would refuse to handle. But he was skilled in the law, a biting cross-examiner, and something of an orator.

"I appear for the prosecution, your Worship, and at the outset I must ask you to grant an adjournment. I propose merely to give formal notice of arrest."

"I should like to know something of the case," the magistrate suggested quietly.

For the first time Gaunt allowed his eyes to roam round the court and he at once saw two ladies heavily veiled seated a few rows away. It did not need the sight of Edward Drake to tell him who they were, and his heart was beating rapidly when he recognized his wife.

"She has not failed me," was his thought, and instinctively his shoulders were thrown back, and a smile played about his mouth.

"The case is a very serious one, for it involves a charge of murder. I represent the Belgian government, who are acting for the authorities of the Congo Free State. Your Worship is probably aware that the Belgian colonial office has taken over the Free State. Some fifteen years ago the prisoner, John Gaunt, entered the service of the Congo."

"Mr. Ruggles, am I to understand that the charge of murder dates back fifteen years?" the magistrate asked quickly.

"That is so, sir; but I think I shall be able to put forward good reasons for the delay. I was saying that the prisoner entered the services of the Free State, and was appointed to the charge of a district. It is necessary that



your Worship should know something of the state of affairs in that country. I fear that the morals of West Africa are such that we should not understand in our frigid climate, and I regret to say that the officials have been in the habit of providing themselves with native wives."

The color slowly ebbed from Gaunt's face as he listened. There was a touch on his shoulder, and his solicitor whispered in his ear.

"The Baron says there is still time."

But Gaunt made no answer, and listened eagerly to what Mr. Ruggles was saying.

"It appears that a man named Marillier possessed such a wife, but the prisoner cast eyes upon her and determined to secure her for himself. Accordingly, by some means or other, he got her away, and as a consequence Marillier felt aggrieved. A quarrel took place, and the prisoner deliberately shot the man that he had wronged."

The words then became a mere jumble to Gaunt's mind, and he stood there utterly dazed. At last he summoned up courage to turn his head and his breath came with a hiss of apprehension when he saw that his wife had gone.

Gaunt now understood the unscrupulousness of the attack upon him, and his lips were tightly pressed together as he forced himself to listen to the prosecuting counsel's lying statement.

"I have here, sir, several affidavits which depose to the facts I have related, but you will readily understand that I am not in a position to complete my case. There are important witnesses in the Congo, and I fear that I must ask for a long adjournment. That is, unless your Worship would be prepared to commit the prisoner for

trial upon these affidavits, and the evidence which I can obtain immediately from Brussels."

"It depends entirely upon the nature of that evidence," the magistrate remarked drily.

"It is unfortunate that the only witnesses of the actual shooting are natives, and they, of course, are in the Congo."

"It seems to me that theirs is the only evidence that is material and I am surprised that you should not have brought them here before applying for a warrant. Under the circumstances, your application yesterday should have been for a summons and not for a warrant."

Sir Richard Tester rose and spoke for the first time.

"I appear for the prisoner, and I propose to say a few words on that subject, if my learned friend has quite finished," he began in the clear ringing voice, with its note of gentle persuasion which helped to bring him renown.

"I would suggest that you grant an adjournment for a week," broke in Mr. Ruggles, "when I will proceed to examine the witnesses at my disposal. I shall then be in a better position to tell you when my witnesses will arrive from the Congo."

"What have you to say, Sir Richard?" the magistrate asked.

The famous counsel slowly rose and took up his gold-rimmed eye-glasses with which he proceeded to punctuate his remarks.

"In the first place, sir, I say with all deliberation that this is not a bona fide prosecution, and I am surprised that my learned friend should have lent himself to such a barefaced proceeding. It is necessary, sir, that I should

trouble you at some length, but probably you are aware that Mr. John Gaunt — I will not call him the prisoner — has been engaged upon a humane task, that of rousing the public to a proper appreciation of the terrible conditions under which the natives of the Congo live. It is natural to believe that this agitation is distinctly unpalatable to the governors of the Free State, and I say that the prosecution has been brought solely with the idea of discrediting Mr. Gaunt, and rendering him incapable of continuing what I will term his noble work. I take the first opportunity of denying the truth of the statement which you have just heard from counsel, and I am of opinion that he has been falsely instructed from motives of malice. It is suggested that my client deliberately shot the man Marillier under the most discreditable circumstances, and now I will tell you what really happened."

Then Sir Richard proceeded to speak of Gaunt's sudden appearance at the flogging of the native girl, and the consequences of his interference.

"I suggest that the facts have been deliberately misstated for the purpose I have before mentioned, and I maintain that the prosecution has not the slightest hope of proving what they have put forward. Now I address a larger public when I express a wish that these proceedings shall not be allowed to influence Mr. Gaunt's work," he wound up slowly and impressively.

"I am willing to adjourn the case for a week," the magistrate remarked.

"As to bail, your Worship?" Sir Richard said suavely. Mr. Ruggles jumped to his feet, and intervened with vigor.



"The charge is that of murder, and I strenuously oppose bail. The prisoner is a man of such great wealth that no amount you could fix would deter him from leaving the country, if he so wished."

"I am sure that your Worship will not be inclined to take away Mr. Gaunt's liberty. I am aware that bail is very rarely granted in cases of murder, but this accusation is so frivolous that I am confident that you will see the justice of my application. I repeat that the sole motive of this prosecution is to silence my client," Sir Richard said with some warmth.

"At this stage I will express no opinion upon the proceedings, except to remark that the alleged crime took place many years ago. Mr. Gaunt is a well-known man and it is natural to wonder why all these years have been allowed to pass without any steps having been taken. I shall grant bail—the prisoner giving security in one thousand pounds—and two other securities of a like amount."

"I am obliged to your Worship," Sir Richard said quietly.

Gaunt happened to turn round, and his eyes alighted upon the Baron de Croiseuil, who was talking excitedly to his solicitor. Mr. Ruggles once more jumped to his feet.

"Surely your Worship will hear me before giving such a decision? I repeat that the charge against the prisoner is the most serious known to the law, and that you will be forming a most dangerous precedent if you grant bail. I cannot impress upon your lordship too strongly my opinion that if the prisoner is allowed to go free, he will never dare to face the trial."



"I have given my decision after due consideration. The prisoner will be admitted to bail upon the terms I have stated," the magistrate answered drily.

Gaunt was led from the court while the formalities were being completed, and it was some little time before the papers were signed. At last it was all finished, and he left the police station to find Edward Drake awaiting him with the motor-car.

Newspaper lads were running along the street shouting their wares :

"Serious charge against John Gaunt. Proceedings at Bow Street," and a grim smile came to the millionaire's face.

"What did Lady Mildred say to you?" he asked of Drake with great anxiety.

"Nothing. She merely left. Of course she will not credit the absurd statement made by Ruggles, but naturally she was upset."

Gaunt was not listening, for he was filled with a great anxiety and when the car reached his house he jumped down and hastened into the hall.

"Where is your mistress?" he demanded of the footman, and his voice was harsh.

"Her ladyship left half an hour ago, sir."

"Alone?"

"No, sir. Her ladyship's sister, and the nurse with the baby accompanied her ladyship," was the answer, and Gaunt moved slowly away.

## CHAPTER XXXI

**W**HEN Lady Mildred realized that her husband had been arrested and had left the house in charge of an inspector of police, she gave way completely and was prostrated with grief. But she did not lack courage and when Edward Drake came to see her she forced herself to greet him calmly.

"You are responsible for this," she said in a low voice.

"I do not think so, but I will not attempt to defend myself. Mr. Gaunt has acted the part of a brave man and I honor him," he answered steadily.

"You honor him for going to prison?"

"Yes. The police court is not always a disgrace. Some day you will think as I do. Your husband is innocent of the crime with which he has been charged, and his accusers know him to be innocent. It is but an attempt to silence him, and the attempt will fail," Drake said with quiet conviction.

Lord Lynton rushed into the room and there was great excitement on his face.

"I have just been telephoning to the Baron. He tells me that it is not too late, and if Gaunt will only give the promise, he will see that these proceedings are stopped. Mr. Drake, you must follow him to the police station and make him do this."

"From your knowledge of Mr. Gaunt's character, you

should understand that such a visit would be useless. He has made up his mind and nothing that I or any one else can say will change his purpose."

Lady Ethel had followed closely after her brother, who had explained to her what had happened.

"Mr. Drake, will you come with me?" she said quietly, and led the way to the library. "I ask you as a great favor to go to Mr. Gaunt. I believe you underrate your influence with him, and that if you try hard he will consent to give the Baron this promise."

"I have already said that it would be useless," he answered gravely.

"Yes, but I am not sure that you believe what you said. For some purpose of your own you have been driving Mr. Gaunt on to this mad course. You, and no one else, are responsible for what he has done. If you had not entered into his life he would never have given a second thought to the wrongs of the natives of the Congo."

He endeavored to interrupt her but she continued with greater earnestness.

"Have you not seen how happy they have been lately? My sister loves him, and I thought that all these difficulties had vanished. Yesterday Mildred gloried in her husband's love, and now he is in prison. I love my sister dearly, and I cannot see her life ruined.

"I believe that Mr. Gaunt is innocent," she continued gravely, "but even then, this charge will cause a great scandal. Mildred is deeply hurt that he should have refused to do the little thing she asked, for it would seem as though he placed this wretched crusade above his wife's love. Won't you go to him?"

Her eyes were fixed steadily upon him and he was deeply moved.

"I shall be very grateful to you, Mr. Drake," she said simply.

"I hate to refuse you, but I cannot do it. My conscience tells me that Mr. Gaunt is doing his duty."

"And that is your last word?"

"It must be."

"I am greatly disappointed, not only for my sister's sake but for my own. I thought that you were my friend. I have respected you as much as any man I know, and now I can only think that you are acting in this strange way for some secret motive, of which you are ashamed. You pretend to be Mr. Gaunt's friend, while all the time you are proving yourself to be his bitterest enemy. Under the circumstances, I would suggest that you leave this house," she wound up scornfully.

Drake was distressed and knew not what to do. He could see that no word of his would make her think differently of him, and yet he would not go.

"Mr. Gaunt's last words were that I should look after Lady Mildred," he answered gravely.

"Look after the woman whose happiness you have helped to ruin?" she cried contemptuously, and before he could answer she had hurried away.

And during the whole of the interview he had been longing to tell her the truth, for he hated to see scorn in the eyes of the woman he loved. She believed him to be acting from unworthy motives, and he could not defend himself.

A broad-minded man, he had mapped out a course of action from which he would not deviate in the smallest de-



gree. It was his conviction that the sufferings of the natives of the Congo could be made to cease by the efforts of Gaunt, and the misery of millions of human beings he placed far above every other consideration. What mattered his own happiness — what mattered the happiness of Gaunt and Lady Mildred, when such a stake was at issue?

Just before the dinner hour his brother came in, tired out with a long day's work. He was succeeding beyond his most sanguine expectations and was rapidly getting together the body of men which Gaunt required. In fact many of them were to leave for Las Palmas by the next steamer, there to await instructions.

Lindsay Drake was thoroughly upset by the news of Gaunt's arrest, but his brother endeavored to cheer him.

"I believe that God is with us, and that He will not allow anything to stop us from this good work," he said solemnly.

They dined alone, and afterwards continued their discussion of the arrangements which were already far advanced, in spite of the very few days which had elapsed since work had been commenced. Edward Drake had approached the representatives of San Salvador and had ascertained that there had been great difficulty in finding the large sum of money which must be paid before possession of the cruiser would be granted. Like most South Americans, Señor Alvarez was quite open to a bribe and had entertained the proposal with great eagerness. Now there remained but the details to discuss and Gaunt's presence was necessary before the matter could be finally settled.

It was Edward Drake's intention to go to the police

court at an early hour in the morning, but when he was about to start a message came from Lady Mildred that she wished to see him, and he hastened to her room.

Her face was pale and dark rims encircled her eyes, for she had passed a sleepless night, but when she had awakened a great deal of the bitter feeling against her husband had passed away.

"John loves me, and nothing else matters," she told herself.

When Drake entered she received him quietly, and silenced his words of sympathy.

"I would rather not talk of it," she said wearily. "I have sent for you because I wish you to take me to the police court. My brother refuses to go."

"Do you think it wise?" he asked hurriedly.

"I wish the world to see that I believe in my husband's innocence, and the best way of showing it is by being present."

"I, too, intend to go," Lady Ethel announced from the doorway, but she took no notice of Edward Drake, not even vouchsafing him a glance.

Drake then left them to find out the time when the case would be heard, and they reached the court just before twelve o'clock. Curious glances were thrown at them as they entered, and soon it became known that Gaunt's wife was present. Lady Mildred's face was devoid of expression, but under the insistent staring she grew nervous, so that at last she let fall a thick veil which effectually concealed her features. However, her purpose had been accomplished, for it would be reported in the papers that she was present.

It was not until her husband stood in the dock that

she really realized that he was a prisoner, and she clutched tightly at her sister's hand.

If they should find him guilty?

The mere thought caused her heart to throb madly, and when she caught sight of the Baron's smiling face, she could have cried out in her agony. But soon her attention became concentrated upon counsel's speech, and she followed his words with an eagerness that was painful.

And then there came the description of the crime with which Gaunt was accused. A quiet gasp escaped her as she understood the meaning of what had been said. John—her husband—had robbed a white man of his wife—a native woman—and then had shot the man whom he had robbed. Her husband accused of such baseness! It was incredible! But was it possible that these people could bring such a charge unless there were some foundation for it? An intense jealousy seized her in its grip and she rose to her feet.

"Come, Ethel," she whispered hoarsely.

Drake, too, rose to accompany them, but she waved him back.

"I wish to go alone with my sister. Stay here," she gasped, and he obeyed her.

The car was outside and Lady Mildred entered and threw herself back against the cushions.

"Tell him—to drive—home quickly," she said to her sister, and the words were uttered with great difficulty.

The car started off and Lady Ethel drew down the blinds, for her sister was crying piteously, and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Perhaps it is untrue," Lady Ethel whispered.

"But the disgrace of it. I hate him. I will never willingly see John again," Lady Mildred cried vehemently.

When she reached home she went at once to her room, and threw herself on the bed, while great sobs shook her. Although she knew it not, the wound was to her pride—that the man she loved, the man whose wife she was, should have his name coupled with a native woman; and a great anger against him mastered her. Honestly she believed that an end had come to her love, and now she almost hoped that he would remain in prison. At last her sobs ceased and she formed a determination as she bathed her face. Her maid was summoned and received orders to pack at once for a long visit.

Lady Ethel came in and gave a cry of surprise when she saw the preparations that were being made.

"You are going away?" she said with great distress.

"Yes. Do you think I can stay under the same roof as my husband after what has passed? Is it necessary to explain?" she asked wearily.

"No, dear; but won't you take a little time for consideration?" Lady Ethel said anxiously.

"I am leaving here at once. Will you come with me?" Lady Mildred cried impetuously.

"Of course I shall, but I think you ought to give your husband a chance of explaining."

"I wish never to see him again. I hate him."

Orders had already been given that the large car should be got ready, and when directions had been given



for the forwarding of their luggage, Lady Mildred led the way to the hall.

"Surely you will write to John," Lady Ethel suggested diffidently.

"Yes — I will." And Lady Mildred crossed to the table on which there was a box of stationery.

"*To my dying day I shall regret that I am your wife,*" she wrote and sealed the envelope and handed it to a footman.

They entered the car and the nurse sat facing them with the baby in her arms, but the little one resented being disturbed in his morning's sleep.

"Let me have him," Lady Ethel said quietly.

But her sister was staring through the window, a great misery in her eyes, but wounded pride can even drive away love.

## CHAPTER XXXII

**J**OHAN GAUNT once again read his wife's letter with its message: "*To my dying day I shall regret that I am your wife,*" and the words burnt themselves into his brain. Drake was standing near but spoke no word for he could read tragedy on the face of his friend, and realized that sympathy would be of no help.

"Now I am with you heart and soul. The Baron is responsible for this, and the Baron and his friends shall pay me. Read that," Gaunt said and passed the letter to Drake. The latter took it hesitatingly, and glanced at the two lines.

"You must not attach too much importance to this," he said earnestly. "Your wife was upset and already she will have regretted such a message. You must remember that Ruggles' speech must have sounded horrible to a woman's ear. Your wife listened to an accusation that you had robbed a man of his native mistress and then had deliberately shot the man that you had robbed. I believe it is not the truth of the charge that has distressed her but the fact that such a charge has been made. She loves you, and her respect for you will have been shattered, her pride in you will have received a grievous wound, and her instinct was to strike back. She knew that the easiest way of making you suffer would be through your love for her — hence this letter."

"You may be right, but I do not care. She has

left my house, taking my child with her, and I swear that I will never try to bring her back," Gaunt cried recklessly.

"You, too, are upset, or you would not say those words. It was in the same mood that your wife wrote to you. I have no doubt that she will be back to-night. You may be sure that she will read Sir Richard's speech, and will feel ashamed of having acted so hastily."

There was misery in Gaunt's eyes, but with a supreme effort he pulled himself together, and going over to the writing-table produced a bundle of papers from a drawer.

"Drake, I shall be glad if you will not again refer to Lady Mildred. You will doubtless be glad that henceforth I shall be able to concentrate my energies on our scheme. We have so far been particularly fortunate, and unless something unforeseen happens, the expedition ought to start within a fortnight. By the bye, what about Alvarez?"

"He is waiting to hear from me. If you wish, I could arrange an appointment for to-night. He appears very anxious to come to an arrangement, for San Salvador badly needs the money."

"Fix up the appointment; the sooner it is settled the better."

"My brother has asked Captain Armstrong to dinner. The invitation was given before he knew of your arrest. I presume you would like him to come?"

"Who is Captain Armstrong?"

"I think he is the very man we want. Until a year ago he was a commander in the navy, but he had to

leave the service owing to a serious injury to his knee. He was a very capable officer, and would be an ideal commander of our war-ship. Of course, he has been told nothing of the nature of the expedition, but I should imagine that it is just the thing that would appeal to him. At one time he was in command of the *Thistle*, a gunboat on the west coast of Africa, and he knows every inch of the coast. It was there that my brother first met him."

"Good; I shall be glad to meet the captain. Fix up the appointment with Alvarez for ten o'clock. By that time, we may have come to an arrangement with Armstrong, and he will be useful at the interview."

"I will go and telephone," Drake answered, but he did not move at once, and Gaunt was conscious that he was being regarded with deep sympathy.

"Well? What is it?" the latter cried irritably.

"I should like to say how sorry I am that this has happened. It was diabolical of the Baron to have caused such a lying story to be told in court."

"The Baron will be repaid. His pocket shall suffer, and he will feel that more than any other punishment."

Alone, Gaunt stared moodily before him, and sat motionless for a long time. His pride was hurt that his wife should write him such a letter, and in his anger he could not make allowances for her. And yet it was but a few hours ago that they had been supremely happy, and it was difficult to realize that she had left him. But there was much to be done, and in work he would seek forgetfulness.

For a long time he struggled with himself, and when at last he went up-stairs to dress for dinner, all traces of



distress had left his face. His manner was calm and collected as he greeted Captain Armstrong, and the two men were attracted by one another at the outset. In appearance the latter was the typical naval officer, a man of few words, but thoroughly efficient.

It was not until they were smoking their cigars in the library that Gaunt broached the subject.

"I want you to treat my proposal as a confidence," he began.

"Certainly, sir," was the prompt answer.

And Gaunt proceeded to outline the scheme, to which Captain Armstrong listened with close attention, and it was noticeable that he asked no questions until the millionaire lapsed into silence.

"I do not propose to understand your motive, but I assume that it is a philanthropic one," Armstrong said quietly.

"You are right in your assumption," Drake broke in quickly.

"Philanthropy coupled with a desire for revenge," Gaunt added drily.

"I can better understand the latter. Of course, your plan is a dangerous one."

"Is it feasible? That is more to the point," Gaunt interrupted.

"I can see no reason why it shouldn't succeed. As a matter of fact I was up on the Tyne a few weeks ago and saw the San Salvador cruiser. She is capable of doing all the work you would require, for the Congo defenses are not very strong." The captain paused a moment and then continued gravely: "Yes, I am of opinion that we could safely 'hold up' the Congo; that is, until some European power sent war-ships to crush us."

"You use the word 'we,'" Gaunt remarked significantly.

"Intentionally, sir, for I should like to join you. The Admiralty has no further need of my services, and thinks that my groggy knee makes me useless. As a matter of fact I believe that I am as capable of good work in the navy as ever I was. The last twelve months have been a terrible nightmare to me. I have found myself wandering from Devonport to Portsmouth, from Portsmouth to Chatham, and I have been utterly miserable. The service was life to me, and I am only too glad to get back to harness, even if it is to engage in what practically amounts to a piratical expedition. We certainly ought to see some fun," the captain wound up, and there was a merry twinkle in his eye.

"We shall be all right for men below deck, engineers and mechanics, but we are rather short of trained gunners," Lindsay Drake said, speaking for the first time.

"I dare say I can put my hand on a few men. Please tell me exactly how far you have gone, and then we can make our arrangements," Armstrong said cheerfully.

"Shall we first settle your position, captain? You will be in command of the cruiser to all intents and purposes, but of course, my say in the policy will be the final one," Gaunt said quietly.

"That is only reasonable. You will find me a loyal pirate."

Edward Drake rose to his feet, and his face was deeply flushed.

"Mr. Gaunt said that revenge was part of his motive, but I must tell you that the idea originated with one motive, and only one; namely, to free a nation that is

being cruelly tortured, and done to death. I hope that I am a Christian and my conscience tells me that I am doing right in joining this expedition. Every other means has failed, and it is only as a last resource that we are about to use force," he said earnestly.

"I appreciate and respect your motive, Mr. Drake. More than that, I understand it. But I will be equally frank. I have agreed to join you for the fun and sport of the thing. You must take me on those terms, or not at all," Armstrong answered with an engaging smile.

"Drake, we won't discuss the expedition from an ethical point of view. Captain, I am glad to have met you, for I think that you are the man we want. There is only one other matter to settle — the question of salary," Gaunt said with a smile.

"That is soon settled. I am not a poor man, and as I said before, I come for the fun of the thing or not at all; but stay, I don't mind a thousand of these excellent cigars," Armstrong answered, as he inhaled a deep breath.

And then they began to discuss details with animation and it was arranged that Captain Armstrong should take complete charge of all that concerned the cruiser. While they were in the middle of the discussion Señor Alvarez was announced, and was at once brought to the library. The South American's manner was of a suavity that was oppressive, but he evidently had a keen eye to business.

"The position is this," Gaunt said bluntly. "You haven't enough money to complete the purchase of the cruiser. As a matter of fact, I know that you won't require the war-ship for at least six months, for you won't

be ready till then to deal with your troublesome neighbor. I am willing to pay the balance of a hundred thousand pounds to the builders and you can formally take over the cruiser. You will have as crew our men, and Captain Armstrong will meet you at an agreed place. In consideration of my having made the payment, you will lease the cruiser to us for six months."

"I do not know the purpose for which you require the ship," Alvarez said, "and how shall we stand if you fail to deliver her to me at the end of six months?"

"I am willing to enter into a bond to pay for the full value of the ship should I fail to deliver her," Gaunt replied.

"And you will not tell me to what use the cruiser will be put?"

"It isn't necessary for you to know, señor, but I may say that I am willing to give you a check for twenty thousand pounds of which you may make any use you wish," Gaunt said significantly.

This bribe closed the matter, and it was arranged that the check should be dated a month hence.

"I take that precaution, señor, and I tell you plainly that if you talk to any one of our little arrangement, the check will be stopped. I require secrecy," Gaunt said bluntly.

"Which I will gladly give — at such a price," Alvarez added under his breath.

After the South American had left, the discussion was resumed, and it was late when the party broke up.

"You think that we can be ready in a fortnight?" Gaunt asked of Armstrong.

"Yes. I shall go to Newcastle in the morning. I



shall let it be understood that I have entered the service of San Salvador, and Alvarez must back me up. If he does so, I can go on working without arousing any suspicion," the latter answered.

"That is an excellent idea. You must not come to my house again. Captain Drake had better take up his quarters at an hotel, and you can communicate with him. I shall not be surprised if the Baron keeps a pretty close watch on my movements," the millionaire remarked.

When Drake and Gaunt were alone, neither of them showed any inclination for bed. The former was silent for a while, for he was trying to devise a means of reconciling Lady Mildred to her husband, while Gaunt was thinking of his wife.

"I am sure that Lady Ethel will be your friend. She will do all that she can to bring her sister back," Drake said suddenly.

"You believe that?" Gaunt answered incredulously.

"Yes, for she will know that Lady Mildred's happiness will lie in you. I sometimes think that you do not do justice to your sister-in-law. She is not the frivolous woman you imagine her to be."

"I fear that you are prejudiced in her favor."

"Good-night," said Drake hurriedly.

Gaunt held out his hand and a smile flitted across his face.

"My friend, I am not blind, and I wish you more luck than I have had," he said quietly.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

LADY MILDRED'S destination was the family dower house, the use of which her brother had given her as a country retreat. It was several hours' drive from London, and they were all tired out by the time that they arrived. During the journey the sisters spoke very seldom, and it was not until they had dined that any serious conversation took place. Then it was Lady Ethel who broached the subject.

"I suppose you will write to John to-night and tell him where you are?" she began nervously.

"No," was the uncompromising answer.

"I won't presume to advise you, Mildred, but he will be very anxious, and after all you are judging him without hearing his side," Lady Ethel answered with quiet persistence.

"I refuse to discuss it with you. Now I am going to bed, for I am tired," Lady Mildred said coldly and immediately she left the room.

But alone, her composure vanished, and she threw herself on to the bed, sobbing bitterly, and it was many hours before she fell asleep, worn out in mind and body. When morning came she was once more calm, and her manner was cold and forbidding when she met her sister.

"I absolutely refuse to discuss my husband with you," she said to her, "and if you persist in doing so, you must leave here."

"It is for your own good, Mildred, for I hate to see

you spoiling your life. Read this morning's paper and you will see that John's counsel denied that John took away the native woman from the man he shot except to save her torture. You will say that John was quite right in shooting the brute who could torture a woman in the way Marillier did. Don't you see that this charge is only trumped up by the Baron to force John to silence? If I were in your place, I would be by my husband's side, and help him to defeat his enemy," Lady Ethel cried vehemently.

Lady Mildred had seized the newspaper and was eagerly reading the full account given of the proceedings at Bow Street.

A perusal of Sir Richard's speech made her doubt for the first time that she had acted wisely in leaving her husband. But pride quickly banished the doubt, for she could imagine her friends commenting on the charge.

"It is an easy matter to deny its truth, for John could do nothing else," she told herself.

It was not merely this accusation that distressed her for there was also the fact that all this scandal might have been avoided by his giving a simple promise to the Baron. And he had refused to do this, even when she had appealed to him so passionately.

The days passed slowly, and as each morning came, Lady Ethel hoped that her sister would have relented, but there was no sign of any change; so, when a week had gone, she rose early and drove straight to London, without leaving word where she had gone. It was twelve o'clock when she reached Park Lane, only to find that there was no one in the house except the servants. However, she decided to wait Gaunt's return, and she

went to her room to prepare for lunch. As she passed her brother-in-law's room she chanced to glance through the open door, and to her surprise noticed many trunks lying around, all of which were strapped.

"Can he be going away?" she asked herself.

There was too much luggage for a short visit, so it was evident that a long journey was contemplated, and she determined not to leave London until she had found out where John was going. When she went down-stairs again she heard the sound of voices in the library and so entered.

Gaunt and Edward Drake were talking earnestly together, and they stopped when they saw her.

"Good-morning," she said brightly.

"Good-morning," Drake replied curtly.

"John, I have just left Mildred. I want you to come back with me to see her," she said earnestly.

"Did she send you to me? Have you any message?" he asked eagerly.

"No. Mildred has not been very well, and I am sure if you saw her, everything would come right. I have seen that your trunks are packed, and I fear that you are going to do something stupid."

"My wife will have to come to me, after what has happened," Gaunt answered sternly.

"John, don't let any silly pride ruin your happiness. After all, Mildred has some cause for complaint."

"I refuse to discuss it," he answered with a harsh laugh, and strode from the room.

"Mr. Drake, won't you help me?" she said and her hands were outstretched towards him in appeal.

In a moment he had clasped them, and their eyes met



—his filled with love as he struggled to keep back the passionate words that came near his lips.

"I can do nothing. Mr. Gaunt will not be influenced, for he is deeply hurt, and rightly so, I think. Go back to your sister and persuade her to come here at once. In a few days it will be too late for ——"

He stopped and she looked at him anxiously.

"Is John going away? Will it be for a long time?" she asked quickly.

"I can tell you nothing, for it is not my secret."

"But this wretched police court case. I had forgotten that it was to-day. What has happened?"

"Nothing. A little evidence which was worthless was given, and the case was adjourned until next Thursday. But you may assure your sister that there is no danger to Mr. Gaunt. The worst he did was to shoot Marillier, but it was in self-defense, and he was justified."

"I agree with you. The man deserved death," she answered vehemently.

Drake suddenly realized that he was still holding her hands — and a vivid flush came to his cheeks.

"Ethel, I love you," he whispered passionately, for the temptation was too great for his strength, and for the moment he had forgotten that this was the woman whom his brother loved.

She disengaged herself gently, and her eyes met his steadily. But before she could speak the door was thrown open and Gaunt came in.

Lady Ethel gave a quick sigh of relief, but her face was flushed and she deliberately turned away from Edward Drake.

"Are you ready?" Gaunt asked of the latter.

"Yes."

"Come along then."

Drake still hesitated, but receiving no encouragement from Lady Ethel, he moved slowly away. She hastened after them, however, and addressed her brother-in-law.

"John, I am going back to Mildred. Won't you send her some message?"

"I have already answered you."

"You are very cruel. You ought to make allowances for her," she cried passionately.

"Good-bye," he called to her, and slipping his arm through Drake's hastened away.

Lady Ethel realized that it was no use to stay longer, so made preparations for her return, and was about to enter the car that was in waiting at the door when she heard her name called; and turning, she saw Lindsay Drake approaching her, an eager smile on his face.

"I am so glad to see you. I thought I should not have an opportunity of wishing you good-bye."

"You are going away?" she said quickly, and then gave him a curious look. "Come with me a little way. Mr. Gaunt and your brother have just gone out," she added.

"I ought to see them at once," he answered doubtfully.

"Surely you can spare half an hour?"

Her manner was so gracious that he could not withstand the temptation.

"I must not be late," he remarked, and jumped up beside her and the car started off immediately.

"Are you going abroad?" she asked casually.

"To West Africa."

"Surely your leave is not up? You have only just come home. May I ask if you are going alone?"

"I would much rather not talk about myself," he answered hurriedly.

"Then let us talk of Mr. Gaunt. Is he accompanying you to West Africa?"

Captain Drake did not answer and she grew more insistent.

"And is your destination the Congo?" she persisted.

Perhaps it was intuition coupled with her woman's wit that made her ask the question. There was the fact that Gaunt was evidently making preparations for a long absence; and she remembered the determined way in which he was fighting for the cause of the Congo natives. Now there was Captain Drake's hurried departure and when she saw his hesitation her conjecture seemed to be verified.

"So Mr. Gaunt is going with you to the Congo?" she insisted.

"I wish you would not ask me these questions, Lady Ethel. I hate to refuse you but already I have been indiscreet. I would willingly tell you everything but in honor I am bound to silence," he said earnestly.

"You have answered me, and I wish to know what it means. You must be aware that my sister and Mr. Gaunt have quarreled, and if he goes away for a long time, their estrangement may be forever. It is this mystery which is the cause of everything. Tell me the reason that compelled Mr. Gaunt to force this scandal upon us. He did force it, for at a word from him the whole thing would have subsided. If only my sister knew his motive, I believe that she would go to him and ask for forgiveness."

Captain Drake was moved, for he could see that she was greatly disturbed, and for the moment he was tempted to tell her everything. But the temptation was thrust aside, and his face became stern.

"I can only say that his motive does him honor," he said steadily.

Suddenly he gave a cry for he chanced to look through the window and saw that they had reached the country. He had been so deeply interested in his companion that all knowledge of time and place had left him, but now he realized that he would be late for his appointment.

"Where are we?" he asked anxiously.

"I really do not know," she answered with indifference.

"I must get back to London at once. Please order the chauffeur to return."

"You will not do what I ask; then why should I help you?" she said with a touch of malice.

In an instant he had moved the indicator, the car came to a standstill, and he jumped to the ground.

"How far are we from a railway station?" Drake demanded curtly from the chauffeur.

"Two or three miles, sir," the chauffeur replied.

"Mr. Drake, come back into the car," Lady Ethel said in a low voice; and when she saw that he hesitated, added to the chauffeur: "Drive back towards London, but stop when we meet a taxi-cab."

"Thank you," Drake said gratefully, and once more sat down beside her.

For a time neither of them spoke but he was conscious that every now and then she threw him a quick



glance from beneath her lashes. His eyes were turned steadily towards the passing scenery, for he dared not look at her.

"Captain Drake, I am sorry. It was a mean trick," she began nervously.

In an instant his hand had covered hers, pressing it convulsively.

"Lady Ethel, I shall not see you again for a long time, and this is my good-bye. I want you to know that I love you. Don't answer me, for I know that I have nothing to offer. I am a poor soldier, and ——" he broke off, for his voice shook. "But I couldn't go away without letting you know of my love."

Her face had grown white and she did not answer, but he did not see that her eyes were dim, and her face sad.

Suddenly the brakes were put on, the car slowed down, and the chauffeur signaled to an approaching taxi-cab driver.

"Good-bye — won't you wish me good luck?" Drake said hoarsely.

"Good-bye, and I hope that you will all come back safely. I am sorry, very sorry. Please tell your brother that — but no, I won't send my message. Good-bye."

And she watched him drive away.

"Where to, my lady?" the chauffeur asked respectfully.

"Home."

"Park Lane, my lady?"

"No. To Lynton House," she answered.

The car started and Lady Ethel drew down the blinds for she was crying quietly.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

**W**HEN Baron de Croiseuil heard the magistrate's decision that bail should be granted to Gaunt, his indignation was intense, for both his solicitor and Mr. Ruggles, K. C., had advised him that such an eventuality need not be considered. Immediately the case was over, he hastened back to his hotel where he was soon joined by Sherren, who had been in attendance at the court.

"English magistrates are fools," the Baron cried angrily by way of greeting, and Sherren did not dissent from this stricture on the bench.

"What is your next move?" the latter asked.

"I haven't yet considered it, for I had counted upon Gaunt being put safely out of the way for a time. What about the Amanti case?"

"Weiss is in a furious rage that his name had been mentioned, and when I saw him last night, he made all sorts of threats."

"Never mind Weiss. He doesn't count. Do you think your friend of the Amanti Company would bring Gaunt into the case? I understand that counsel is of opinion that he could be got at on a charge of conspiracy?"

"That is true, Baron, but that would necessitate Weiss also being charged."

"I said that Weiss didn't count, and if necessary he'll have to suffer with the others," De Croiseuil said impatiently.

"Wouldn't it be better to wait till the adjourned hearing of Gaunt's case? If you can only manage to get some strong evidence from Brussels, the magistrate would refuse to grant bail."

"That is impossible, for there's no evidence to be got."

"It wouldn't be the first time that evidence had been manufactured," Sherren suggested.

"True, but I don't like your English courts of justice. Now, if the trial were only taking place in the Congo——"

He shrugged his shoulders expressively, and lapsed into silence.

"I think we had better wait developments," he said at last. "You can go, Sherren, for you will have plenty of work to do. See that the case is reported as fully as possible from our point of view," he added significantly.

"I shall have some difficulty in working the papers. Sir Richard Tester is a man who carries a good deal of weight, and he did not mince matters to-day. It is probable that the more influential journals will regard the case as an attempt to close Gaunt's mouth, and as I have already told you, our press is not easily handled. Besides, newspapers may not comment upon a case which is *sub judice*."

"You think that the bringing of the case was a mistake?"

"Yes, inasmuch as bail was granted. Gaunt's meetings will be packed and now the British public will look upon him as something of a martyr."

"You must persuade your Amanti friends to prosecute him. They can't say that I have a hand in

that and the two cases together may make some impression."

"It might be done, but Gaunt is a powerful man, and my friend might not like the task of fighting him," Sherren said slowly.

"What kind of a man is he — as unscrupulous as yourself?"

"Pardon me, Baron, but there is no need to insult me."

"Can you bribe him?" the Baron asked impatiently.

"He might be prepared to accept a pecuniary inducement," Sherren answered cautiously.

"Sound him, and let me know the result. Now you can go."

It was but seldom that the Baron's manner lost the suavity but he was upset for he realized that he had been guilty of an unforgivable sin — an error in tactics. However, the events of the next few days reassured him somewhat, for Gaunt made no sign. In fact several meetings on the Congo question had been canceled and he began to grow rather uneasy.

"Have I frightened him?" he asked himself.

But instinct told him that Gaunt was not the man to be beaten so easily and he wondered what was to be the next move. He had seen Lady Mildred leave the court during the trial, and had ascertained that she had gone to Lynton House. Therefore it was natural to suppose that husband and wife had quarreled, and he realized that Gaunt must be greatly embittered by the false story that he had put forward. To add to the Baron's discomfort, the authorities in Belgium were very displeased with what had happened, and their letters had expressed their opin-



ions very forcibly. The Baron, for the first time, was glad that his late master was dead for King Leopold would have shown him no mercy.

However, witnesses were sent over from Brussels, and amongst them was the official who had made inquiries into Marillier's death. This gentleman's name was M. Bouvais and his instructions were to proceed to the Baron's hotel.

"You are prepared to give evidence?" De Croiseuil asked curtly in French.

"Certainly, your Excellency, but I speak very little English."

"That doesn't matter. But, stay, I will translate to you what our counsel, M. Ruggles — *mon dieu* what a name! — what the counsel said at the court."

Bouvais listened attentively, and his face was expressive of blank amazement.

"Now you know what your evidence will be. It is not difficult to remember," the Baron wound up cheerfully.

"But it is not the truth. I examined the facts and judged that Gaunt was justified in shooting Marillier. The man was *canaille*," Bouvais said quietly.

"You must forget that and only remember what I have just read," the Baron rejoined suavely.

"I fear that I do not understand your Excellency. As a man of honor I must tell the truth," Bouvais said with quiet dignity.

"The exigencies of the service demand a little sacrifice. It is essential that Gaunt is confined in prison. Remember what is at stake, monsieur."

"My honor is at stake and I remember that."

"Don't be foolish, mon cher Bouvais. We have a way of handsomely rewarding those who are zealous for our interests. If I remember your record, you were not quite so scrupulous in the Congo. As a minor official you got more than your quantum of rubber, and there were a few incidents in the collecting of it. There was the massacre of one village about which the missionaries made an outcry. They demanded your trial, and we protected you. It was not so very long ago that you were in charge of a district. Of course we denied that you were guilty of atrocities, but how many natives were killed when that chief rebelled? You wiped out many villages and ——"

"They were only natives, and I did as I had been ordered. I did as my brother officials have done and are doing," Bouvais answered warmly.

"And yet you will not consent to give this evidence against Gaunt?"

"No. He is a white man, and I liked him," was the decisive reply.

"Ah, Bouvais, your answer pains me, for I fear that we shall cease to be friends. You are drawing a pension, and we cannot continue to pay one who will not go out of his way to help us."

"The pension is a small one and I am not a poor man."

"And all your wealth you have got through us. This is your gratitude to those who gave you the chance of becoming a rich man. But you cannot be serious. Consider, my friend. You are rich and we can add to your riches; upon my recommendation you will receive honors."

"But in receiving honors I shall lose my own. I cannot do this thing, and nothing you can say will make me change my decision."

The Baron was a keen judge of human nature, and knew when he was beaten, so he made no further effort to persuade Bouvais.

"You can go back to Brussels. I will report upon your disobedience," he said coldly.

Bouvais bowed slightly, and without another word left the room. He was like dozens of his fellow-countrymen, who think nothing of killing off and torturing a native, yet would hesitate to commit deliberate perjury.

The Baron was thoroughly irritated by his lack of success, and, for a while, paced restlessly up and down the room until he was interrupted by the entrance of a waiter.

"Mr. Weiss is here, sir."

"I cannot see him. Say that I am engaged," the Baron said impatiently.

"I rather expected that, so I took the precaution of coming up," Weiss said from the doorway, and strolled in.

There was a glitter of anger in his eyes, but his manner was very calm and collected.

"What explanation have you to give me of your dastardly conduct?" he demanded.

"I do not understand. Have you any cause for complaint?" the Baron asked quickly.

"You know that you have betrayed me. It was your tool Sherren who caused Davies to be prosecuted, and it was you who caused my name to be mentioned."

"Why should I do that, Mr. Weiss?"

"Because you wish to get at Gaunt. I came to you as a friend, and I trusted you. In return you have made my name a byword."

"I deny it. I have had nothing to do with the matter," the Baron said calmly.

"And Sherren?"

"He had nothing to do with it—to my knowledge. I am surprised that you can accuse me of such dishonorable conduct."

"I happen to know that Sherren was the moving spirit. I am not a fool, Baron, and understand that you found it necessary to sacrifice me. You deny it—well—we will leave it at that for the moment. Good-day; Baron. I think that you will find me a dangerous enemy," Weiss said menacingly and took his departure.

And the Baron resumed his restless walk, but he was disturbed by the Jew's threats, for he knew the man to be powerful. However, he comforted himself with the thought that Weiss could do very little to injure him. Any exposure of the part he (the Baron) had played would naturally call attention to Weiss' own guilt.

The Baron was present at the adjourned hearing against Gaunt, and to his dismay, the magistrate was not in the least sympathetic. In fact he commented severely upon the evidence that was brought forward, and when he adjourned the court made some significant remarks to Mr. Ruggles.

"I am very dissatisfied with this case. It seems to me that it has been brought recklessly, and without sufficient evidence."

"My material witnesses were in the Congo but they



are now on the way to this country," Mr. Ruggles intervened.

"Until their arrival, I will say no more."

"There is further evidence that I can produce in a week's time," Mr. Ruggles urged.

"Then I will adjourn the case till then. The prisoner will be released on the same bail."

"I am instructed that there is a grave suspicion that the prisoner intends to leave the country, and I strongly urge that your Worship will refuse to grant bail."

"May I ask if my learned friend has any evidence to back up that suggestion?" Sir Richard Tester asked quietly.

But Mr. Ruggles made no answer.

"The insinuation is in keeping with the rest of the case — groundless," Sir Richard continued.

"The bail will be as before," the magistrate announced abruptly.

And John Gaunt, who stood in the dock, drew a deep breath of relief.

## CHAPTER XXXV

**W**HEN Lady Mildred was told that her sister had gone away in the motor-car without leaving any message, she at once jumped to the conclusion that her journey was to London. She had been aware that Lady Ethel had been very anxious, and it was natural to think that she might go to see John Gaunt with the idea of affecting a reconciliation between herself and her husband.

The week's solitude had somewhat softened her feelings, but there still remained some bitterness. And perhaps, too, jealousy that Gaunt would not make a sacrifice to retain her love.

But when the afternoon came to an end, she began to wait with impatience her sister's return, and her restlessness increased with each passing hour. When at last the sound of the car could be heard she ran eagerly to meet her.

"Where have you been? Why did you not tell me you were going?" she demanded impetuously.

Lady Ethel smiled a little wanly as she threw off her furs.

"I have been to London. But let us go to your room, dear."

The sisters did not speak again until they were alone and there was great anxiety in Lady Mildred's eyes.

"I have seen your husband."

"Tell me at once. Why do you hesitate?" Lady Mildred cried vehemently.

"It is difficult to explain what happened. It was as I thought. Your letter has wounded him deeply, and I am afraid that you must go to him, if you wish to be forgiven."

"Forgiveness!" Lady Mildred repeated scornfully.

"Yes. You, I think, are in the wrong. If you take my advice you will order the car and go to London at once. You would get there by ten o'clock."

"Why should I go to him? It is I who have been wronged, and he must come to me."

"If that is your state of mind, then I fear that you will remain apart. It is a pity, for I am convinced that you are both passionately in love with one another. Pride is responsible for the ruin of many lives, and I pray you not to be stupid, dear," Lady Ethel said gently.

Lady Mildred was silent, and it was evident that she was struggling with herself. It was strange to find that her sister's sympathy was so decidedly in favor of her husband, and she began to wonder if, after all, she herself might be to blame. But the scene in court came back to her mind, and she could hear the counsel's words as he described the charge against Gaunt.

And while she fought with her pride, she was conscious that her love for John Gaunt was burning fiercely, and that if he were to appear she would receive him with widely opened arms.

"I went to Park Lane, and no one was there," Lady Ethel continued quietly. "I chanced to pass your husband's room and I saw many trunks there, so I imagine that he is going away."

Lady Mildred drew a quick breath, and a look of fear crept into her eyes when she remembered the talk in the library.

Could John be going to the Congo? Was it possible that they were about to carry out the mad scheme that they discussed?

"Ethel, you must come back with me," she cried eagerly.

"I am very tired, but I will gladly come," Lady Ethel answered, and all the listlessness vanished in an instant.

"Give orders for the car, and I will see about the packing. Baby will stay here with nurse."

"You are going to John?"

"Yes. Yes. I have been a fool, and I see it for the first time. You are right, Ethel. There is only one thing that matters."

"Love," Lady Ethel repeated softly, and the color came to her cheeks.

Half an hour later the sisters were driving back to London, and the chauffeur had received instructions to travel as quickly as possible. Now and then the car swayed ominously, but neither of them noticed the tremendous rate at which they were going. Lady Mildred began to tell of Gaunt's plans to hold up the Congo Free State, and her story was listened to with intense eagerness.

"Is Mr. Drake going?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes, and his brother. It is a curious business for a parson to join in."

"Mildred, I warn you to prepare yourself for a disappointment if you think that you will be able to persuade



your husband to back out of it. He loves you passionately; but there are some things that have more weight with him than love."

"I don't think he will go, if I can only see him," Lady Mildred answered confidently.

The conversation languished and they were both relieved when at last the car stopped at their house in Park Lane.

"Is your master in?" Lady Mildred demanded of the footman.

"No, my lady. He left a couple of hours ago," was the answer.

She entered quickly and ran up to her room in the hope that there might be a letter for her, but there was nothing there.

"I will ask the servants if there is any message. You had better rest quietly; you look ill," Lady Ethel said and hastened away.

She returned in a few minutes, and her face was grave as she sat down by her sister.

"He has gone, and has left no message at all. I have been to his rooms, and the trunks are not there," she announced.

"What does it mean?" Lady Mildred asked hoarsely. "Do you think that he can already have started?"

"No, but we must be very careful what we say. We must be loyal to John, and we must not arouse any suspicion among the servants."

"It is nearly eleven o'clock — too late to do anything to-night," Lady Mildred said miserably.

There was a knock at the door and Lord Lynton came in hurriedly,

"Have you any idea where Gaunt is?" he asked anxiously.

"No. Haven't you seen him?"

"I have been dining with Sir Keith Hamilton, and afterwards he talked to me very plainly. It appears that he has formed a great liking for Gaunt, and he expressed his opinion very forcibly about this police court business. He is convinced that Gaunt played no unworthy part in that Marillier affair, and that the whole thing is a put up job on the part of the Baron. I chanced to say that I had taken up rather a strong attitude, and he promptly told me that I was a fool, advising me to go and make my peace at once."

"And I have come on a like errand, but I am afraid that we are too late," Lady Mildred said brokenly, and tears forced themselves to her eyes.

"Surely there ought to be no difficulty in finding him," the Earl said decidedly.

"Perhaps he has already left the country?" Lady Ethel broke in.

"No, that's impossible, for he is on bail," Lord Lynton replied.

"Bail would not prevent him from going. I think I ought to tell you ——"

But Lady Mildred pulled her sister up sharply.

"We have no right to tell John's secrets to any one. Perhaps we are worrying ourselves about nothing. There may be news in the morning," she said hopefully, but there was no hope in her heart.

The morning came and the sisters breakfasted at an early hour. But there was no letter.

"Shall we call at the Carlton? Captain Drake was

staying there," Lady Ethel suggested, and they visited the hotel, only to find that he, too, had left on the previous evening.

"I believe that he *has* gone to the Congo," Lady Mildred cried vehemently when they were once more in the car.

Next they visited Gaunt's office in the city, where they were received by Mr. Foster, the secretary, who could give them no information.

"Mr. Gaunt has ceased to come here, my lady. In a couple of months' time the office will be finally closed."

"When did you last see Mr. Gaunt?" Lady Mildred asked eagerly.

"Yesterday, but I have no idea where he is at present."

"Cannot you tell me if he is going abroad?" she persisted.

"No, my lady. I have no information at all. It is not Mr. Gaunt's custom to tell me of his movements, unless he thinks it necessary for me to know," Mr. Foster answered with a smile.

They returned straight to Park Lane, for that was the most likely place at which they would receive news, but when evening came Lady Mildred was convinced that her suspicions were correct, and she grew utterly despondent. It was revealed to her how great was her love for her husband now that she believed that he had gone deliberately into danger. All the dreadful things that she had heard of West Africa came rushing to her mind, and she grew desperate when she realized that he had left her with anger in his heart. And she broke down completely, sobbing piteously; in vain Lady Ethel strove to comfort her.

"I love him — oh, so much — and it is my fault that we quarreled. I should have known that he would not do so dreadful a thing as that wicked barrister charged him with. What shall I do? I must see him," Lady Mildred cried passionately.

"Perhaps he has only gone into the country for a rest," her sister suggested. "I don't think that he could have left for the Congo without saying a word."

"You don't understand John. It was my lack of trust, and that cruel, cruel letter that hurt him. What a fool I have been."

The morning came, bringing no news, and they wandered listlessly about the house. Suddenly Lady Ethel gave a cry, and almost fiercely clutched her sister's arm.

"Did you not say that they intended to stop at the Canary Islands? To-day is Saturday, and the Union-Castle Liner sails. Let us go to Waterloo and see if John or one of the Drakes is there," she cried impetuously.

The car was ordered at once, and upon arriving at the station they found the boat train drawn up, and by the bustle around it was evidently soon to start. They walked eagerly along closely examining each carriage, but saw no signs of either of them.

A warning whistle, and the train moved away.

"Of course they could join the *Saxon* at Southampton, for John would not wish to be seen. Could we get there in time?" Lady Mildred cried excitedly.

"At any rate we can try," Lady Ethel answered eagerly. And then began a mad race to the port. She urged the chauffeur to full speed, and the powerful car



tore along the road. Once or twice a policeman held up a warning hand, but they went on heedlessly until they reached the dock gates.

"Has the *Saxon* sailed?" they asked anxiously.

"Just about starting," was the answer.

Now their progress was tantalizingly slow, and when at last the wharf came in sight, they saw that the ropes had been thrown off and that the big liner was moving towards Southampton water.

But Lady Mildred's eyes were fixed on the upper deck, and she could just make out the figure of a man leaning against the rails. There were field-glasses in the car, and with trembling fingers she focused them.

"It is John, and we are too late," she said with a gasp.

But she would not give way, and turned to her sister her face white and her lips trembling.

"Our yacht the *Heron* is lying here. She can be commissioned in a few days," she said very quietly.

"What are you going to do?" Lady Ethel asked in wonder.

"Follow them," she answered curtly.

"And I will go with you," Lady Ethel said in a low voice, but her eyes were shining brightly.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

THERE was a feeling of constraint when Gaunt led Edward Drake from the room after the latter's interview with Lady Ethel.

"I am afraid that I came in at a rather inopportune moment, but this is not the time for love-making," Gaunt remarked kindly.

Half an hour later they were with Captain Armstrong, who had just arrived from Newcastle to make final arrangements.

"We can sail in a couple of days," the captain remarked cheerfully.

"And if we leave by the *Saxon* on Saturday, you can pick us up at Las Palmas. With the superior speed of the *Esmeralda* you ought to arrive about the same time we do," Gaunt remarked.

"She did twenty-five knots in her last trial," the captain answered complacently.

"You are quite satisfied with the men you have got?"

"Yes, but I have had to be very cautious, for there are one or two naval men at Elswick who have been mighty curious. I must say that Señor Alvarez has played the game skillfully, for they all think that I have entered the San Salvador navy. But I shall be glad when we are outside British waters."

"Then you had better get away as soon as possible. Of course you must not come into Las Palmas harbor?" Gaunt asked.

"No, for one doesn't generally go to South America via the Canaries. I intend to lie a few miles off, and I shall come ashore in the pinnace. I suppose I shall find you at the Santa Catalina Hotel?"

"Yes. Captain Drake will be with us, and he will look after the men who are already there."

They dined at the Carlton Hotel, and Captain Armstrong was in the highest spirits, in contrast to the others. The meal had just come to an end, and they had lighted their cigars when Edward Drake gave a significant look at Gaunt. The latter turned round and saw that the Baron de Croiseuil was seating himself at a table on the other side of the room.

"It is as well that he should see me here. Hang it, I'll go over and speak to him," Gaunt said suddenly, and immediately hastened across the room.

"Good-evening, Baron," he said suavely, and took a chair on the other side of the table.

For once in his life the Baron lost his composure, and flushed hotly.

"You have done your worst and have failed," Gaunt continued quietly.

"Not quite, for I have effectually closed your mouth, my friend. It was very painful to me — the necessity of taking these proceedings. But still, it is possible to end them. One word, and Mr. Ruggles will explain that a dreadful mistake has been made," the Baron said coolly, after a supreme effort at self-control.

"I do not intend to say that word. You have done your worst. You have put forward a false charge in an infamous way. You have attempted to ruin me utterly. And do you think that I am the man to take it lying

down? No, my friend. It soon will be my turn," Gaunt said grimly.

"You can do nothing, and I am still willing to be friends."

"Friends!" Gaunt cried contemptuously. "Such *canaille* as you, my friend! I would prefer an out and out *Apache*. But I won't detain you from your dinner. *Au revoir*, Baron."

And he was immediately ashamed of the outbreak, for he had done no good save to relieve his feelings. He did not realize that he had made the Baron thoroughly uncomfortable.

It was decided that they should leave Gaunt House that night and go straight to Winchester, and there await the wire from Captain Armstrong to the effect that the *Esmeralda* was about to sail.

The next day such a message came.

"You have still time to motor to Lynton House," Edward Drake suggested as they were getting ready to start for Southampton, where they intended to stay the night.

"I have told you that I won't discuss my wife with you," Gaunt answered coldly.

"You are very hard, and I think you will regret it. Try to put yourself in her place. She was sorely tried," Drake protested quietly.

In reply Gaunt took his wife's letter from his pocket.

"Read that, and if you are a man you will understand."

And Drake knew that it was hopeless to make another effort at reconciliation. But that night was a very miserable one for all three of them. Each was thinking



of the woman that he loved, and remembering that in the morning they sailed upon a desperate adventure from which they might never return.

Passages had been booked under fictitious names, and they went aboard the *Saxon* just before sailing time. However, there was considerable delay, and they knew no peace until the last rope had been thrown ashore.

And then Gaunt turned to Drake.

"We have started for good or ill," he said with unwonted solemnity.

"It is for good, and God is with us," Edward Drake answered reverently.

And then he gave a cry.

"There is a motor-car with two ladies."

Gaunt strained his eyes towards the shore and his face became very white when he recognized his wife. He did not move his eyes from the place where Lady Mildred stood, but his face did not soften. The liner cleared the point, and began to travel more quickly, so that in a very few minutes the wharf disappeared from view.

And then he turned away with a sigh and walked to the cabin which had been reserved for him on the deck. There was a cold wind blowing, and he closed the door; not till then did the mask fall from his face. Love tugged at his heart, and he would have given all he possessed to be face to face with his wife. His anger vanished, never to return, and his longing for her came back with overwhelming force. Now he blamed himself bitterly that he had not gone to her before his departure, for now, many weary weeks must elapse before he could see her again.

He sat there thinking deeply—of the vow he had made—his crusade against the rulers of the Congo—and his wife. There was a knock at the door, and the steward entered to unpack his trunk. Still he did not move until the bugle sounded the hour for dressing.

Almost mechanically he put on his evening clothes, and went down to the saloon, where the passengers were busily looking for their places at the table. Edward Drake and his brother were already there, but the meal was a very silent one, for each was busy with his thoughts.

After dinner Gaunt and Edward Drake went to the comfortable smoking-room on deck, and lighted their cigars.

"Now there can be no turning back," Edward Drake remarked.

"Do you wish to?" Gaunt demanded abruptly.

"No. Except that I was sorry to leave England without obtaining the answer to a question which I had asked."

"I suppose you refer to the time when I interrupted you. I am very sorry. Drake, you are a good fellow, and I could not wish a woman a better husband."

"Thank you," Drake answered simply. "At one time I never dreamt of telling Lady Ethel of my love. My brother Lindsay is my rival, and I thought that I must leave the way clear to him. But love can be selfish, and I intend to fight for my happiness. But it is hardly credible that she can care for me."

"You never can tell where a woman's feelings are concerned."

"Lady Ethel was with your wife on the wharf. I am sorry that they did not come a quarter of an hour earlier. Lady Mildred will be very miserable."

"And so will her husband. But we won't talk of it, Drake. I have made up my mind to think of one thing, and one thing alone—the Congo. This may be a rash adventure of ours, but it shall not fail from any lack of energy on my part. And here's luck to it," Gaunt remarked as he raised his glass to his lips.

As they steamed down the channel the weather grew so rough that many of the passengers were confined to their cabins. But they had determined to make no acquaintances, and kept themselves strictly to themselves, so they were rather glad than otherwise. Upon reaching the bay of Biscay, as is often the case, the sea was smoother and they were able to spend more time in the open air. It was not until the fourth day that anything of moment happened. It was just after twelve o'clock that they saw smoke on the horizon, and soon they could make out a steamer that was traveling very rapidly.

"Looks like one of our small cruisers," the first officer remarked to them.

And it was not until the war-ship was but some two or three miles astern that they knew that she was the *Esmeralda*.

"She is flying the San Salvador flag," the officer remarked.

Gaunt ran for his glasses, and fixed them on the vessel of which he was the temporary owner and his heart beat more rapidly as he noticed her workmanlike appearance.

"She is doing well over twenty knots, and I should say

she carries turbines. A smart little ship," the friendly officer continued.

The *Esmeralda* was quickly overhauling them, and soon signal flags fluttered on the *Saxon* which were answered by the cruiser.

"What does she say?" Gaunt asked quickly.

"Only her name. She is not very communicative, and is evidently in a hurry."

The smoke was belching from her stacks and she seemed to spurt forward so that the *Saxon* was rapidly left behind.

It was late at night when they reached Las Palmas, and they went ashore at once, to be driven along pebbly streets to the Santa Catalina Hotel. Immediately upon their arrival Captain Drake left to visit the men who had already arrived and were awaiting them.

He ascertained from the officer who had been placed in charge that there had been no mishap, and that they were ready to embark at any moment.

Breakfast had been ordered for an early hour in the morning, and they had not been at the table very long before Captain Armstrong joined them.

"Everything all right?" asked Gaunt.

"Couldn't be better," the captain answered briskly. "I have a good lot of men and they are shaping well. Haven't had trouble of any kind."

"Good. Let us get breakfast over for we mustn't stay here a moment longer than we can help."

Tugs had been chartered, and by eleven o'clock the whole party had left the harbor. There had been many inquiries from the officials of the port, which Captain Armstrong had deftly turned aside.



An hour later they reached the *Esmeralda*; the men were quickly got on board and the tugs returned to Las Palmas.

Gaunt and the Drakes stood on the quarter-deck and looked around curiously. Yes. Captain Armstrong had done wonders in the short time at his disposal.

Six inch guns stared at them from squat turrets, and Edward Drake looked at Gaunt with something akin to awe.

"I am beginning to realize what it means. Maybe death, but life for the natives of the Congo," he said in a low voice.

An order from the bridge and the flag of San Salvador was lowered. Then an ensign took its place, which was white with a red cross.

"She is doing close on twenty-five knots," Captain Armstrong remarked as he joined them, and there was a look of pride on his face.

But no one answered, and the men looked at one another.

And Edward Drake sighed.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

LADY MILDRED did not enter the car until the *Saxon* had disappeared, and to her sister's surprise her face was almost cheerful.

"Captain Samson lives in Southampton and I am going to see him at once."

"You really intend to go to the Congo?" Lady Ethel asked quickly.

"Yes, and shall start as soon as possible. The *Heron* is at Summers and Payne's yard, and we will go there and find out Captain Samson's address."

An hour later they were in the house of the captain of Gaunt's yacht, and Lady Mildred at once came to the point.

"Captain, how soon can the *Heron* start on a long voyage?" she asked.

"A matter of a fortnight, my lady. The engineer is tinkering with his turbines and has got 'em to pieces," Captain Samson replied.

"What is the shortest time, working night and day?" she insisted.

"It might be managed in a week, my lady," the captain answered reflectively.

"It must be quicker than that, captain. We will sail on Friday next. Tell the steward to lay in stores for a long voyage, and the bunkers must be filled up."

"May I ask where we are going, my lady?"

"First of all to the Canary Islands. See the engineer and have the work started at once. I shall be at the Sta-

tion Hotel on Thursday night, and I shall expect you there. Good-bye, captain."

And with a cheerful nod Lady Mildred left him and gave the chauffeur orders to drive back to London.

"I don't understand you," Lady Ethel said timidly. "A couple of hours ago you were utterly miserable, while now you seem almost happy."

"I am not sure that I understand myself. I am only thinking that in a week or two I shall see John. I have no fear how he will receive me, for I've no pride left, and I am prepared to go on my knees and ask his forgiveness for that cruel letter," Lady Mildred said earnestly.

"I shall be glad to come with you, dear."

"I am not sure that I ought to take you, for we cannot catch them up until they are in the Congo, and there may be danger."

"I am not afraid," Lady Ethel answered quickly.

During the next few days they were busy making preparations for the voyage, and it was not until Thursday that anything of importance happened. It chanced that they lunched at the Carlton Hotel and upon reaching the streets they heard the name of Gaunt being shouted by the newspaper boys.

*"Disappearance of John Gaunt. Bail estreated."*

And they read an account of the proceedings at the police court. Mr. Ruggles, K. C., had been in great form and took full advantage of the position.

"Listen to this," Lady Mildred cried, and proceeded to read from the paper. "The court was crowded this morning at the adjourned hearing of the charge of murder brought by the Congo government against Mr. John Gaunt. The magistrate took his seat and the name

of the millionaire was called, but there was no answer. At first it was believed that he had been delayed by some accident, but when half an hour had passed, it was murmured that he had left the country. The magistrate adjourned the court for an hour, and when he again sat the police gave evidence to the effect that Mr. Gaunt had not been seen for some few days. Inquiries at his office and at Park Lane gave no information, and it is assumed that, for some purpose of his own, he has left the country. Mr. Ruggles proceeded to address the court: 'I must remind your Worship that I anticipated this event and strongly urged that bail should not be allowed. In spite of my urging you gave him his freedom, of which he appears to have taken full advantage. I apply to your Worship to grant a warrant for his arrest.'

"'Have you anything to say?' the magistrate asked of Sir Richard Tester.

"'No, your Worship. I can only think that some accident has happened to my client.'

"'We understand the warrant has been signed and is in the hands of the police.'"

"They will have to go a long way to execute it," Lady Mildred remarked with a smile.

"You do not seem very distressed," Lady Ethel answered drily.

Her answer was a laugh, and they alighted from the car to be met by Lord Lynton, who was just coming out of the house.

"I see you have heard the news," he remarked with a glance at the paper which she still held in her hand. "I suppose the next we shall hear will be of his arrest."



"I don't think so," Lady Mildred answered. "Come into the house, Geoffrey. I want to talk to you."

Lord Lynton followed to her room, and it was evident that he was very curious.

"You have not the air of a wife who has just heard that the police are after her husband," he remarked drily.

"Geoffrey, give me your word of honor that you will not breathe a word of what I tell you," she said earnestly.

"I can keep a secret. It is my business," he answered.

"Well then, John has gone back to the Congo. Ethel and I are going to follow him in the *Heron*. We sail to-morrow."

"The devil you are!" he blurted out.

"Yes, and I think it would be as well if you came with us."

"You may as well tell me the whole story."

"Very well, but remember that it is in confidence," she answered, and proceeded to relate all that had happened.

He listened in open-eyed amazement, and when she had finished he had lost some of his wonted composure.

"It is pure madness, and the man must be stopped," he said hotly.

"Remember your promise," she said warningly.

"Of course I will, but the thing is stupendous. It may cause a European war."

"Will you come with us? We need not consider Europe. I am only thinking of my husband."

"Yes. I will come if I can get leave of absence. When do you leave?"

"We shall motor to Southampton in a couple of hours' time."

"I will be back before that," he answered, and hastened away.

Sir Keith Hamilton did not keep him waiting very long, and received him pleasantly.

"I suppose you have come about your brother-in-law. I shall not be altogether sorry if he has left the country and doesn't return," Sir Keith remarked drily.

"I have come to ask leave of absence for an indefinite time," Lord Lynton answered, and his voice was very grave.

"For what purpose?"

"To accompany my sister on her yacht."

"A pleasure trip?"

"Not exactly, sir. In fact I am bound to silence."

"I see. Does this voyage concern Gaunt?"

"I can say that our destination is the Congo," the Earl announced slowly.

"May I ask if Gaunt will be on board?"

"He will not. But please don't cross-examine me, sir. I am in a difficult position, and I must keep my promise."

"Yes, that is necessary," Sir Keith said reflectively.

"You can have your leave."

"Thank you, sir. May I ask if you have confidence in my judgment?"

"Yes — to a degree," was the cautious answer.

"I can tell you nothing, but I would suggest that the first cruiser squadron of the Atlantic fleet be sent to the Canary Islands for a few weeks."

"That is a large order," Sir Keith said with a smile, but his eyes were filled with curiosity.

"The squadron is now at Gibraltar. You know I would not suggest this without a weighty reason. Admiral Stretton is a fine sailor, and something of a diplomatist, I believe."

The foreign secretary's eyes did not leave the Earl's face, and it was a long time before he spoke.

"I think I may venture to say that the squadron will cruise in the direction of the Canaries. May I understand that you will communicate with me when you are at liberty to do so?"

"Yes, sir. At the first opportunity."

"You can tell me nothing further?"

"I am not sure that I have not already said too much. I am very anxious, and my responsibility is great."

"May I ask if Gaunt has already gone to the Congo?" Sir Keith said quietly.

"I cannot tell you, sir."

"Do you anticipate international trouble? I must admit that you have made me rather anxious. Cannot you give any further information at all?"

"No, sir."

"Well, good-bye, and a pleasant voyage. My regards to your sister — and her husband."

Lord Lynton returned at once to Park Lane and sought out his sister.

"Mildred, you must release me from my promise. Sir Keith ought to know everything," he cried impetuously.

"You must not tell him. It is my husband's secret, and if he is to fail, it shall not be through me," she answered firmly.

"But you have no idea what is at stake. This action of Gaunt's may precipitate a crisis."

"Better that, than I should betray my husband."

"I agree with Mildred," Lady Ethel broke in quickly.

"You are only a child," the Earl cried contemptuously.

"But I am coming with you," she answered quietly.

"Upon consideration, I think it would be better that you should both stay at home. There may be danger, and you will be safer here," he said firmly.

He was surprised at the laughter caused by his remark.

"Pray don't joke, and it would be as well to understand that you are coming as a guest on my yacht," Lady Mildred said coldly.

"You mean that you won't obey me?" he answered hotly.

"The car is ready. *You* may stay in England if you wish. We are going," Lady Mildred said quietly.

When they reached Southampton, Captain Samson was awaiting them at the hotel with the news that the yacht was ready for sea.

"Then we sail to-night," Lady Mildred said promptly, and their luggage was taken aboard without any delay.

"Less than six days' start," Lady Mildred told herself, and as soon as they had left the harbor she interviewed the captain.

"You are to steam at full speed."

"Yes, my lady."

"It is a matter of life and death. Carry out my instructions carefully and I shall be very grateful."

"Yes, my lady."

And the captain returned to the bridge.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE sun had just risen above the horizon and through the haze could be seen a low lying shore which gleamed yellow in the distance. On the quarter-deck of the *Esmeralda* stood a group of men, and each held a pair of marine glasses to his eyes.

"Yes — that is Banana," Captain Armstrong announced decisively.

The voyage had passed without untoward incident, but no one on board the cruiser had had an idle moment. The men above deck had been drilled, and some practise had been made with the guns. The leaders of the expedition had discussed every eventuality, and the next few days would prove whether they were to meet with success or failure.

The ship was slowed down to twelve knots, and the men were rapidly putting her into battle trim. Gaunt and Edward Drake watched them in silence, for now they had nothing to do save to realize that they were responsible for what might end in disaster.

At last they caught a glimpse of the mouth of the Congo, and the *Esmeralda* was turned directly towards the entrance of the river. Captain Armstrong joined them, and it was evident that he was in the highest spirits.

"There is only one thing that I wish ; that we were flying the White Ensign," he remarked.

"I think that of the Church is more appropriate,"

Edward Drake answered, and glanced at the flag which flew at the stern.

"Hallo! That looks like a ship in the distance," Armstrong cried, and hastened to the bridge.

The *Esmeralda* spurted ahead and entered the river on the far side from the town of Banana.

"I hate being only a spectator. I wish I had something to do," Gaunt said irritably.

A few miles up the river towards Boma could be seen a large steamer, which Gaunt at once recognized with the aid of his glasses.

"It is either the *Albertville* or the *Leopoldville*," he remarked.

"Are they British ships?"

"They belong to an English firm, although they fly the Belgian flag. There is a regular line of steamers running from here to Antwerp, and I'll bet that this ship is carrying a million francs' worth of rubber, and a like value of ivory."

"Tainted with blood," Drake said in a low voice. "Please God this tyranny will soon come to an end."

"Now we are in for it. It's sink or swim. See, Armstrong is signaling them to stop," Gaunt cried eagerly.

They watched the vessel approaching, and soon answering flags appeared.

"Watch for Armstrong's reply. There it goes. 'Heave to or we fire.'"

The next few minutes were breathless with excitement, for the *Leopoldville*, for that was the name of the ship, continued to advance; but she had slowed down perceptibly.

She came nearly abreast of them but much nearer the shore and still continued on her course.

Again flags fluttered from the *Esmeralda*.

Suddenly there was a sharp report and a shot was fired from the cruiser. But still the *Leopoldville* did not stop.

"Now comes the critical moment," Gaunt said beneath his breath.

Again the sound of a gun, and the most skillful gunner was the firer of the shot.

Gaunt's eyes were eagerly fixed on the liner.

"Splendid," he cried. "It hit her right astern. Her rudder has gone, and probably her propellers."

"Will she sink?" Drake asked anxiously.

"I should think not. The water-tight compartments ought to keep her afloat. Even if she does go down, there won't be any loss of life."

The *Leopoldville* gradually ceased to move, and she lay there rolling gently with the swell. But in a few moments they could see that a boat was being lowered, and was rapidly rowed in the direction of the *Esmeralda*.

The red-faced, indignant, and greatly perplexed captain of the *Leopoldville* ran up the companionway where he was received by Captain Armstrong and John Gaunt. Behind them stood Edward Drake and his brother.

"What is the meaning of this outrage? Who are you?" he cried hotly.

"One question at a time, please, captain. This is a war-ship engaged for a particular purpose, namely, the stopping and, if necessary, sinking of all ships which carry rubber and ivory from the Congo to Europe."

"You are dastardly pirates," was the angry answer.

"Not so, captain; for I believe pirates generally go after spoil. Our motive is solely to help the natives of the Congo," Captain Armstrong answered suavely.

"Isn't that a parson standing there? Will you kindly explain what it means?" the captain asked of Edward Drake.

"I can tell you no more than you have already heard," the latter answered.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have disabled my ship merely with the idea of helping the natives?"

"Yes, captain."

"Then, sir, let me tell you that it is a damnably absurd action. My ship is helpless, and it is impossible to repair her without docking. What am I to do with my passengers?"

"Take them back to Boma," Gaunt broke in drily.

The captain of the *Leopoldville* turned round quickly.

"I know you. You're Gaunt," he cried.

"You are right. Come below and I will give you a full explanation. You are an Englishman and we've no ill feeling against you personally. It is only right that you should know why we've taken such a liberty with your ship," Gaunt said pleasantly.

Half an hour later the captain again appeared on deck, and his face bore a very perplexed look; but all his indignation had vanished.

"Well, I *am* damned," he muttered to himself as he stepped into his gig. "But I'm not at all sure that I don't wish that they come out of it all right. I never did like these Belgian Congo brutes."

For the rest of the day the *Esmeralda* cruised about



the entrance of the river but no other ship appeared until the following morning when a Woermann liner steamed from the north; she was treated in a similar way to the *Leopoldville* greatly to the indignation of her German captain, who came on board the cruiser and threatened them with the vengeance of the "mailed fist."

Captain Armstrong was enjoying himself thoroughly, and each passing day claimed one or more victims, until the mouth of the Congo was dotted with helpless steamers.

It was on the third day that a steam launch came down the river and approached the cruiser.

"A visit from his Excellency, the Governor-General," Gaunt announced, and they gathered round the companionway to receive the ruler of the Congo.

"Who is in command of this war-ship?" he demanded harshly.

Captain Armstrong stepped forward.

"I am responsible for its presence here," Gaunt intervened.

The Count de Chambord gave him a keen look.

"Yes. It is as I thought. You are John Gaunt. I should like to speak with you," he said quickly.

"If your Excellency will come to my cabin," Gaunt said politely.

"I received a cable from Brussels in answer to my report upon the attack upon the *Leopoldville* in which they suggested that you might be responsible for this outrage. Mr. Gaunt, may I ask what you hope to gain? Is it money?"

"No, Count. I stand to lose money."

"And perhaps your life, for Europe will intervene," the Count said significantly.

"I sincerely hope so," Gaunt answered cheerfully. "I don't think we shall do any good by this talk, for it can lead to nothing. We have come here with a deliberate purpose which we shall carry out to the best of our ability. Hello! The turbines have started. Don't you think that we had better go on deck and see what is happening?"

And the governor-general was compelled to witness the welcome which the incoming liner, the *Albertville*, received, for she was treated in a similar way to her sister ship.

"It is a pity, for we are running rather short of provisions at Boma," the governor-general remarked ruefully.

In his way the Count was something of a philosopher.

"I shall be glad to put our stores at your service," Gaunt said politely; but the offer was as politely refused, and the governor-general departed in his launch.

At dinner that night they were all very serious, for they realized that in a very few hours the crisis would come.

"I think that we have been too successful; nothing has gone wrong. No lives lost, and the Congo is at our mercy," Gaunt remarked.

"Yes, until a cruiser turns up," Captain Armstrong answered drily.

Edward Drake left the mess-room and went on deck. It was insufferably hot, and he wished to be alone. As he strolled slowly along the deck, his lips moved in prayer, for he understood only too well that the issue lay in the balance. At times he had been afraid of what he

had done, for the responsibility was so great; but when he remembered what was at stake, his courage returned.

"We shall win," he told himself confidently.

Their cause was just, for they were fighting for freedom and justice. Every peaceable method had been tried, and only force had remained. The smell of the land reached his nostrils, and in his imagination he pictured the scenes that were taking place in the hinterland — the maimings, the torturings, and the doing to death of thousands of helpless fellow creatures. Yes, this land which stretched from the mouth of the Congo for miles was laid desolate; what had been once a densely populated country was deserted — the work of the white men.

And when he thought of Gaunt, a glad light came to his eyes, for he had grown to love the millionaire as a brother. And then like a fair picture Lady Ethel came to his mind, and he wondered if she ever thought of him.

"It is stifling," Gaunt called from behind. "Dreaming, eh?"

"I was thinking of England."

"Don't, my friend. We have enough here to occupy our minds. I thought that I had passed the days of tense excitement; but now I am like a mad boy enjoying his first gamble. Drake, I am glad I came here. And I will tell you something — I will confess that now I have an honest desire to help the natives," Gaunt said quietly.

The next morning they steamed up the river, further than they had hitherto been. Gaunt and Captain Drake were on the deck, while Armstrong was standing on the bridge with glasses in hand.

Suddenly there was a sharp report — a puff of smoke could be seen on the shore — and a shell whistled over their heads. Another report — and — crash — the shell pitched on the quarter-deck and a violent explosion followed.

Edward Drake came rushing from below, and there was horror in his eyes when he saw two figures lying on the deck. They were John Gaunt and his brother Lindsay.

Captain Armstrong gave sharp orders, and the bell of the indicator clanged. The cruiser turned round and raced at full speed towards the mouth of the river.



## CHAPTER XXXIX

THE news came to the Baron de Croiseuil when he was lying in bed at his hotel. A long cable in cipher from Brussels told him what had happened, and wound up with instructions as to how he should act. By ten o'clock he was at the foreign office, but it was fully an hour before Sir Keith Hamilton arrived.

"Good-morning, Baron," the latter remarked, when the Belgian came in; but his greeting was not returned.

"I have just heard from Brussels that a war-ship is holding up all ships that enter or endeavor to leave the Congo," he announced dramatically.

It needed a long life training in diplomacy to give Sir Keith the strength to receive the news calmly. For a few moments he did not speak, but his mind was working rapidly.

"Give me all particulars," he at last said curtly.

In answer, the Baron placed before him a copy of the cable, with his instructions omitted.

"Have you any idea what it means?" Sir Keith asked quickly.

"Yes — Gaunt."

"May I ask why you think that he is responsible?"

"It is evident. His disappearance, his well-known animus against us, and ——"

"Yes. I think you are right," Sir Keith interrupted him quietly.

"What are you going to do? It is rank piracy, and the pirate is a British subject."

The foreign secretary glanced at the clock.

"I will see you at four o'clock. In the meantime, I must make inquiries. *Au revoir*."

"We shall hold you responsible."

"*Au revoir*, Baron."

And Sir Keith turned deliberately away, and when he was alone, a smile twitched at his mouth.

"I don't know that I am altogether sorry," he muttered, as he rang the bell.

"Find out if I can see the German ambassador at once. Then communicate with the French and American embassies, and make appointments with the ambassadors for two o'clock. You had better go to them yourself and make my excuses for bringing them here. But the matter is of vital importance," he said to his private secretary.

Half an hour later Sir Keith entered Prince Von Lichtenstein's library.

"Good-morning, your Excellency. This is a copy of a cable which the Baron de Croiseuil has received from Brussels. It concerns the Congo."

The Prince read the document, and nodded his head once or twice.

"The situation has its danger," Sir Keith continued, "yet on the other hand, it may be a blessing in disguise. Now we have an opportunity of settling a matter, once for all, that might cause trouble when we are not so prepared to meet it."

"I see that a German ship has been detained and damaged," the Prince remarked reflectively.

"This is so. Also English ships. Also Belgian ones. This pirate has made no distinction as to nationality. Now, Prince, I am going to drop the diplomat in favor of the philanthropist."

Whereat the Prince smiled.

"I think the Congo question has troubled your conscience as much as it has mine and that you would have been prepared to intervene, had it not been for considerations to which I will not more particularly refer."

Again the Prince smiled.

"It seems to me that intervention has been forced upon us. You are as little desirous of international complications as I am. And—don't you think that this is a question that we might settle without the usual delays of diplomacy? I have drawn up a scheme for the administration of the Congo, and here is a copy, from which you will see that I propose to govern the Free State by a council of four. Germany, England, and France will each appoint a member, for we are the most concerned in the Congo, having neighboring colonies."

"May I ask who is to be the fourth member?" the Prince asked suavely.

"He will be the chairman, and will be appointed by the President of the United States. I would suggest that the chairman has a casting vote."

"Yes, that would solve many difficulties."

"Prince, I have been as anxious as any living man to put an end to the present iniquitous rule, but our stupid suspicions of one another have allowed the Belgians to work their will. I appeal to you to help me solve the question, once and for all. I believe that the Emperor ——"

"His Majesty has always been anxious to remedy the present deplorable state of affairs. He has taken a personal interest in the question and I may say that I have certain powers. In fact, I think that I can accept your proposals, subject to the consent of the other Powers."

Sir Keith held out his hand which the Prince grasped.

"Yes, I think we feel alike. Sometimes we may permit ourselves to be human," the latter remarked.

And it was a busy time for Sir Keith until four o'clock came, then he was quietly smoking a cigarette in his office.

"Yes, I will see the Baron at once," he said to his secretary.

De Croiseuil came forward eagerly, for he had passed a few hours of terrible suspense.

"*Eh bien!*" he remarked with well-simulated calmness.

Sir Keith placed a paper before him.

"This is a copy of a provisional agreement for the future government of the Congo Free State, which has been signed by the Powers interested."

The Baron took the paper and his breath came in quick gasps.

"You can take the copy to peruse at your leisure. And—Baron—I am aware of the part you played in the prosecution of John Gaunt. I may say that you are no longer *persona grata* to His Britannic Majesty's government, and I shall suggest that your king shall send some other special representative."

Sir Keith smiled pleasantly until the Baron had left and then his face grew hard.

Then with great deliberation he lighted a cigarette and



suddenly his face relaxed; his mouth twitched and he burst into a laugh. Now that the tension was over he was amazed at the precipitate way in which he had acted; and yet it was all very simple.

"And the insane jealousy of England and Germany has given the Belgians a free hand for so long, while it appears that both the countries were anxious to put an end to the rule of tyranny."

Yes. He had done a capital day's work, and after all it was John Gaunt who had given him his opportunity.

"And now to save the fool from the consequences of his folly," he muttered to himself.

A long consultation took place with the officials at the Admiralty, and when they had arrived at a decision, the operator above them sent forth wireless messages that were to affect the future of John Gaunt.

The evening papers had already received news of the hold-up of the Congo; the facts were related with a fair degree of accuracy and Sir Keith read the comments with quiet amusement.

"It is plain what will happen. The great British public will make a hero of John Gaunt."

In fact, the more serious of the papers were already demanding the intervention of the government.

"*One man has shown England its duty. With fearless courage John Gaunt has tackled the problem, and at great risk to himself,*" said the *Evening Herald*, and went on to demand protection for Gaunt.

The next day it was plain that the English people were thoroughly roused and were determined that the Belgian rule of the Congo must come to an end. All

parties for once were united, and a mass meeting was announced to take place at the Royal Albert Hall.

Sir Keith Hamilton invited the German ambassador to lunch.

"Don't you think it would be as well to put an end to this clamor as soon as possible?" he suggested.

"I have just received the Emperor's intimation that the agreement will be ratified. I have no objection to its being made public at once, in spite of the vehement protests from Belgium," the Prince replied.

"I am not at all sure that the better class of Belgians won't be glad to hear the news. I will communicate with the French and American ambassadors, and I hope that we can make the news public in the morning," said Sir Keith.

And then he returned to the foreign office to receive the Belgian ambassador, to whom he listened very patiently.

"I understand from the Baron de Croiseuil that you have taken the government of the Congo Free State from our hands."

"*C'est un fait accompli*, your Excellency, and won't permit of discussion," Sir Keith answered with an air of finality.

"This man Gaunt. Is he to be allowed to escape without punishment? He has been guilty of an act of rank piracy," the ambassador cried hotly.

"Gaunt will be dealt with; but I cannot tell you what punishment he will receive."

At last the Belgian departed, and before Sir Keith left his office he knew that the provisional agreement had been ratified by the other Powers concerned. That

night a statement was sent to the press announcing the terms of the arrangement, and in the morning enthusiastic "leaders" appeared welcoming this solution of the Congo problem.

But there was one question that troubled every one — what was to happen to John Gaunt? And no one could give the answer. Sir Keith Hamilton smiled to himself as he perused a wireless message that had been sent to him from the Admiralty.

"I think Stretton is the man for the job," he muttered reflectively.

## CHAPTER XL

EDWARD DRAKE knelt down beside his brother, and to his dismay saw that Lindsay was seriously wounded. The doctor came and the two injured men were carefully carried to the sick bay.

The *Esmeralda* was completely fitted up, and even contained a small operating theatre to which Lindsay Drake was taken — unconscious and groaning.

The doctor made a summary examination of both the patients and his face was very grave when he came out.

"Mr. Gaunt is not badly injured; a splinter struck him on the head, and perhaps there is some concussion of the brain, but there is no danger," he announced.

"But my brother?" Edward Drake asked hoarsely.

"I can do nothing, except to ease the pain," was the reluctant answer.

"He will die?"

"Yes. Vital organs are injured, and it will be useless to operate."

"I must go to him," Drake said very quietly, but his face was white and drawn. The doctor led the way, and then left the brothers alone. Lindsay Drake opened his eyes and looked listlessly at his brother.

"I am done for, Edward," he whispered.

"It is my fault. But for me you would never have come here."

"The fortune of war, and I'm not sure that I am altogether sorry."



Edward Drake had sunk on his knees and he spoke a simple prayer that was eloquent of great sorrow.

"Doctor, shall I last long?" Lindsay asked faintly. "This pain is more than I can bear."

The doctor drew near and skillfully injected morphia.

"Ah! That is better," the dying man said with a sigh. "How long have I to live?"

"Captain, you are dying," the doctor answered, and his voice shook.

"Please leave us. Thank you for your kindness. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, captain."

Alone, the brothers looked at one another, overwhelming sorrow in their eyes.

"You know my secret, Edward. Sometimes I thought that she cared for me, but at others I was despondent, for what had I to offer to such a woman?"

"Your love, Lindsay, and I believe that that would have meant everything to Lady Ethel."

"You think so?" he said, and his eyes brightened. "Wish her good-bye, and ask her sometimes to think of me. Ah! Edward, I am very sentimental — I suppose it's the dying. It hasn't been a bad life. I don't believe I've done many dirty actions. I've tried my best. But it's hard to think that I shall never hear her say that she loves me."

There were tears in Edward Drake's eyes as he bent his head and touched his brother's forehead with his lips.

"I know you'll miss me, old chap. But perhaps my death won't be useless. Something tells me that you will win."

And the eyes closed wearily, and his brow was puckered by a frown of pain.

"Don't let Ethel grieve. But perhaps she doesn't care. If only I knew," he said wistfully.

There was a silence, broken only by his labored breathing, and Edward knew not what to say to soothe his brother's dying moments. But quickly he bent his head to listen.

"Mother."

And it was with the name of his parent on his lips and not that of the woman he loved, that Lindsay died. For a long time Edward knelt there, with a great sorrow in his heart. Gladly would he have given his own life for his brother, but, alas, he had been able to do nothing.

At last he rose and gazed steadily at his brother's face, and there was something of awe in his eyes. Outside the doctor was waiting and murmured a few words of sympathy.

"How is Mr. Gaunt?" Edward asked quietly, and his voice sounded strange in his ears.

"Still unconscious. But there is no danger, so long as he is kept quiet."

Drake went on deck where he was immediately joined by Captain Armstrong, who gripped his hand in silent sympathy.

"I have just pulled up another steamer," the captain remarked cheerfully; and that was his way of concealing his sorrow.

Life on board continued as though nothing had happened, but when the sun rose in the morning, every man on the ship stood bareheaded on deck. Wearing his robes of office, Edward Drake stood prayer-book in

hand, and in a steady voice read the words of the burial service over his brother's body, which rested before him, swathed in the flags of his country.

His voice died away, and he turned, and the sound of the cleaving of water struck his ears. His face was set and he gave a little cry when he saw that John Gaunt was behind him.

"I told Mr. Gaunt that he must not come," the doctor cried in great distress.

But the millionaire smiled and held out his hand to Drake.

"I wish it had been I," he said simply, and then fell back into the doctor's arms unconscious.

"This will probably delay the recovery for weeks," the latter cried angrily, as he helped to carry his patient back to his bunk.

When Drake looked round, he noticed that the flag was once more flying from the top of the mast and he sighed wearily. He blamed himself for his brother's death, and a feeling of great despondency held him in its clutches. All the sweetness seemed to have vanished from life, and yet he could not have acted differently. Had God decreed his brother's death as a judgment upon him for attempting to right the wrong-doing by force? And he sought the solitude of his cabin to wrestle with his grief. It was not till the afternoon that he again appeared and then his face was calm and resigned.

The Count de Chambord paid them another visit and was received by Captain Armstrong, but asked to see Gaunt.

"He is injured and must not be disturbed," the captain answered.

"It was reported to me that a shell had struck your ship. I presume that you will now go about your business?"

"Not until we are compelled to," was the brusque reply.

"It was also reported to me that a burial took place this morning from the ship. From the ceremony which was observed, I wondered if it were Gaunt himself who had been killed."

"Mr. Gaunt is below and in no danger. Can I do anything for you? If not——"

The captain paused significantly and the Count took his departure without asking any more questions. During the rest of the day they cruised around the mouth of the river, but nothing occurred to break the monotony. The death of Captain Drake seemed to have subdued the spirits of all on board, for he had made himself very popular among the men.

After dinner Gaunt insisted on holding a conference with Captain Armstrong and Drake, in spite of the protests of the doctor; and their future policy was discussed at great length. They were in utter ignorance of what was happening in Europe, so that they could do nothing but wait events.

To the doctor's consternation, Gaunt became feverish, and the fever was diagnosed to be malaria. In fact, many of the men had begun to suffer from the same disease, in spite of the quantities of quinine that had been served out. Edward Drake was glad of the opportunity for action, and busied himself in nursing the sick.

The following day the doctor announced that Gaunt's temperature was dangerously high.



"He has a strong constitution, but it's the two things coming together," he said, and Drake could see that he was very anxious.

The heat was terrible although the ship was fitted with electric fans, and as he sat in the sick bay, Edward Drake felt that he too was reaching the end of his strength. But Gaunt's voice sounded in his ears, and he was compelled to listen to his delirious ravings.

It was of the vow that he spoke and of his love for his wife. He seemed to be living again the last few weeks and for the first time Drake really understood how great was his love for Lady Mildred, and what tremendous strength of character he must possess to have been able to keep the promise that he had made.

And Gaunt must die, ignorant of whether his sacrifice of self had gained success or failure. At last the fever broke and the delirium ceased, but the millionaire was very weak and would require careful nursing.

Drake went to his cabin, but sleep was far away, for he was thinking of his brother, and of Lady Ethel. How should he face her and tell of Lindsay's death? Now he believed that she loved his brother, and in his imagination he could see the stricken look come into her eyes.

What were they doing? Lady Mildred must have known that they were sailing on the *Saxon* or she would not have gone to the wharf, and it was natural to think that she would remember their talk of the Congo. They had discussed the whole scheme in her presence. Surely she would not remain inactive?

In the morning he was awakened by a summons from Gaunt and he went to him immediately.

"I am much better this morning. I was wondering if we had done enough for our purpose. They tell me that more of the men are sick. Wouldn't it be as well to steam away from this pestilential coast?" Gaunt asked wearily.

"Are you going to weaken — now?" Drake asked reproachfully.

"I was not thinking of myself but of the men. If Europe is going to intervene, she will already have done so. I don't see what good we shall do by remaining."

"We must see it through. You are ill or I don't think that you would suggest that we should play the coward."

"Perhaps you are right," Gaunt answered with a sigh.

There is nothing more demoralizing than convalescence after malaria, and at such moments a man is not really responsible for himself.

The next day Gaunt was much better and there was a look of shame on his face when Drake entered.

"I must have been mad," he said apologetically.

"Not mad — only ill," Drake answered gently.

Captain Armstrong's head appeared at the door.

"There's a large yacht about five miles off. She's evidently coming to pay us a visit," he announced.

"Describe her to me," Gaunt cried quickly, and the captain obeyed.

"She's mine. It's evidently the *Heron*," the millionaire cried and he looked at Drake, but neither of them spoke.

## CHAPTER XLI

THE *Heron* steamed at full speed from Southampton to Las Palmas, but she did not travel fast enough for Lady Mildred, who made Captain Samson's life miserable by the way she worried him.

"Won't she go any faster, captain?"

"No, my lady. She is doing over twenty-four knots," he answered reproachfully.

As soon as they arrived at Las Palmas, Lord Lynton hastened ashore and it was not very long before he ascertained that a number of men had left the island to join a cruiser. He returned with this information and there could be no doubt that Gaunt had gone to the Congo.

Lady Mildred sent for the captain and announced their destination.

"It isn't a fit place for your ladyship to visit. You will be sure to get fever," he protested nervously.

"We start at once, captain. Mr. Gaunt is there, and it is important that we arrive at the earliest possible moment," Lady Mildred answered, and then proceeded to tell the story of Gaunt's expedition.

The captain listened in open-eyed amazement, but he no longer hesitated, and orders were given that the yacht should sail at once. To Lady Mildred these few days seemed interminable, and as they drew near her suspense increased. At last the mouth of the Congo came in sight and with the aid of glasses they could see the

many disabled steamers. It was Captain Samson who first made out the *Esmeralda* and he came from the bridge to tell them.

Lady Mildred was putting on a pith helmet and her face had grown very pale.

"I wonder what has happened?" she muttered to herself. "Captain, will you get a launch ready? I want to go on board at once," she said aloud.

"There is a pinnacle putting off from the cruiser, my lady, and she is traveling towards us at a good speed," the captain answered.

Lady Mildred put the glasses to her eyes and gave a cry at what she saw.

"There is only one man astern. It is not John. I think it is Mr. Drake."

"Let me see," Lady Ethel cried eagerly, and she almost snatched the glasses from her sister.

Lady Mildred turned away for she wished to hide her distress. It was evident that they had recognized the *Heron*, and why had not her husband come to meet her? Was it that he could not forgive her?

Sailors were busy lowering the companionway, and the launch drew alongside. Edward Drake jumped lightly onto the platform and hastened up to greet them.

"Where is Mr. Gaunt?" Lady Mildred cried, before he could utter a word.

"He is ill, and the doctor says that he is not fit to stand any excitement. That is why I have hastened to meet you," he answered quickly.

"What has happened? Is he dangerously ill?" she asked, and her voice shook with fear.

"No. He is out of danger. Shall we go to your



cabin? I have a lot to tell you," he asked; and Lady Mildred led the way.

Edward Drake stood and faced them, and they could see the deep lines brought to his face by grief and pain. But his voice was steady when he began to tell them all that had happened. It was only when he spoke of his brother's death that he faltered, and dared not look at Lady Ethel.

"Mr. Gaunt is in no danger, but you must be very careful. Before you go to the *Heron* I should like to speak to you alone, Lady Mildred."

Lord Lynton and Lady Ethel moved away, and for the first time Drake glanced at the woman he loved. She was crying quietly, and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

When they had gone, he turned to Lady Mildred, and his face was very grave.

"I think I am justified in breaking a confidence. I have thought deeply, and am sure it is my duty to tell you the reason why your husband has acted as he has done. I am aware that you have felt bitter towards him, but it was because you did not know."

"Mr. Drake, you need not tell me. I am ashamed of my conduct, and I have come to my husband to ask his forgiveness," she answered in a low voice.

"Still, I think you should know. Gaunt is a man in a thousand, and I want you to understand his character. He has always loved you passionately from the first time you met, but he was determined to conceal his love until he had won you. He thought he was succeeding until that terrible day when it seemed that in all human probability you would die. Gaunt was in utter despair, and

in his agony he turned to God. You must remember that the specialist had told him that there was no hope of your living. He prayed to God, and made a bargain with Him. Gaunt told me the very words he used, and they are imprinted on my memory. 'Give me the life of my wife, and I swear that every action of my life shall be deliberately thought out, and shall be in accordance with the teaching of Christ.' "

Drake paused, and he could see that Lady Mildred was listening with breathless attention.

"And since that night, when God gave him your life, he has struggled nobly to keep that vow. That is the reason why —— "

"Stop!" she cried harshly.

Her face worked painfully as everything became clear to her mind. She knew her husband's pride that he always kept his word, and she could understand how fiercely he must have been tempted to abandon the fulfilment of his vow, and it was she herself who had made his task a thousand times more difficult.

"What a man!" she muttered feverishly.

And pride and love overwhelmed her so that she grew afraid.

"You are sure that his life is not in danger?" she said tremulously.

"Quite. So long as you do not excite him."

"You may trust me, Mr. Drake. His life is too precious to me."

Suddenly she seized his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"And I am proud of your friendship for my husband. But I have been selfish. I have forgotten your terrible loss. What can I say to comfort you?"

"And your sister, for I believe she loved Lindsay."

She gave him a quick look, but remained silent.

"May I go to John at once? I promise that I will be quite calm," she said at last.

In a few minutes the launch was rapidly taking them to the cruiser. Drake refused to allow either Lord Lynton or Lady Ethel to accompany them, and he would give no reason for his refusal.

As soon as they reached the deck of the cruiser, Drake hastened to the sick bay.

"Gaunt, your wife is here," he said quietly.

"Bring her to me, and you will leave us alone."

And Lady Mildred stood in the doorway, hesitated for a moment, then ran to the bunk where her husband lay.

"John."

She knelt by his side and pressed her lips to his.

"Forgive me, dear. I was cruel, but I did not understand," she whispered.

Their eyes met and there was no need for words. Understanding came to them and the past seemed as though it had not been. And she sat by his side, her hand resting on his, but she did not speak.

"You should not have come," he said reproachfully.

But she leant over and kissed him on the lips.

"I care for nothing so long as I am with you," she whispered tenderly.

The doctor came in, glanced keenly at his patient, and relief came to his face when he had felt Gaunt's pulse.

"May I stay? I will be very quiet," Lady Mildred said appealingly.

"Yes, I think that he is already better, but don't talk too much," the doctor said warningly.

Soon Lady Mildred began to think of the future. In her anxiety for her husband's health, she had forgotten that they were in a war-ship, that had been guilty of acts that might be regarded as piratical.

What would happen? Would John be punished for what he had done? She dared not question him, but she felt that she must know. His eyes were closed and she tried to remove her hand from his, but he stirred restlessly. At last his grip relaxed, and she went on deck where she found Edward Drake who was talking to Captain Armstrong.

"What is going to be the end of this?" she asked, and waved her hands towards the disabled steamers.

"We shall know in an hour's time," the captain answered.

"What do you mean?"

"There are war-ships on the horizon and they are coming here."

"Then why don't you escape while there is time?" she cried excitedly.

"Ask Mr. Drake," the captain said drily.

Lady Mildred looked inquiringly at him.

"We have acted as our consciences directed, and we are prepared to face the responsibility for what we have done," Drake said quietly.

"But you may be severely punished. You, and my husband. Mr. Gaunt is ill. Escape while there is time," she cried excitedly.

Drake shook his head decidedly, and she appealed to Captain Armstrong.

"Don't you think it would be better to go?"

"It is not a matter of opinion. Before we came here



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we laid down a line of action which we shall faithfully carry out. It might be worse, for we are not responsible for any loss of life, save on our own side."

"Poor Captain Drake," she said sadly, and tears came to her eyes.

There was a cry from the bridge.

"The first flies the White Ensign."

"I am glad it is our own people, and no beastly foreigners," the captain said grimly.

## CHAPTER XLII

**T**HE flag-ship of the admiral of the Atlantic cruiser squadron was the *Invincible* and she led as the fleet swept towards the mouth of the river.

Admiral Stretton was on the quarter-deck, and there was a grim smile on his face as he looked at the disabled steamers.

"They certainly haven't been idle," he muttered to himself.

His flag-lieutenant approached and saluted.

"The barge is ready, sir," he announced.

The cruiser's twelve inch guns were pointed full on the *Esmeralda* and the crew stood at their quarters. The fleet had ceased moving and the semaphore on the flag-ship was busily signaling orders.

The admiral entered the barge, accompanied by his flag-lieutenant, and they started off at once. Captain Armstrong stood at the gangway of the cruiser. He was dressed in a suit of drill and wore the white pith helmet of the civilian, but his hand was brought sharply to the salute.

"I have seen you before, sir," the admiral said grimly.

"Yes, sir."

"You were in the service?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps it would be as well if I do not ask you your

name. Who is the lady?" the admiral demanded abruptly.

"I am Lady Mildred Gaunt," she answered coldly.

"Take me to your cabin," the admiral said gruffly to the captain, and did not speak again till they were alone.

"This is a pretty business, sir. Do you realize that you have forced my squadron to come to this diabolical spot? You deserve hanging," the admiral said angrily.

Captain Armstrong did not answer, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

"You can tell me your story. You may as well start at the beginning."

Now and then Armstrong was stopped to answer a question, but very quickly the admiral knew everything there was to be known.

"A mad adventure from the start, sir."

"Has it succeeded, sir? We have had no news at all," Armstrong asked eagerly.

"The Powers have taken over the Congo, if that's what you want to know."

"Hurrah! Pardon me, sir. I will be back in a minute," Armstrong cried and hastened to Drake with the news.

"We've beaten the beggars," he cried triumphantly.

Drake's face flushed, and then became ashen.

"Tell me," he whispered hoarsely, and Armstrong repeated the admiral's words.

"I must go and let Gaunt know," Drake said excitedly, and Armstrong returned to his cabin.

"Well, sir, what punishment do you think you and that man Gaunt deserve? What am I to do with you?" the admiral asked grimly.

"That depends upon your instructions, sir," Armstrong answered with a smile.

The admiral smiled, and took a cigarette from a silver box on the table.

"Yes, I have received my instructions, as you suggest. Armstrong, I will drop the official, and will speak to you as man to man."

"You know my name."

"Yes — unofficially. Now I am going to give you a hint. The fleet will be off the mouth of the river to-night, but I cannot guarantee that a careful watch will be kept. In fact, I think that a man who has had experience in handling a destroyer might creep out without being seen," the admiral remarked slowly and significantly.

"I understand, sir."

"I must see Gaunt. I have a message for him."

"He is very ill."

"Still, I must see him," the admiral said, and the words amounted to an order.

Lady Mildred, who had been seated by her husband, rose when they entered and looked questioningly at the admiral.

"My husband must not be disturbed," she said quietly.

"I am afraid that I must deliver a message to him, my lady. Armstrong, you can go."

The captain saluted and disappeared.

"Mr. Gaunt, I won't trouble you with a long discourse. To-night Captain Armstrong will sail this cruiser for San Salvador. Sir Keith Hamilton thinks that that will be the best solution, for it would be impossible to procure a conviction should you be tried in England. I would



suggest that, when it is dark, you, your wife and the parson, go to the yacht. It would be as well if you also have disappeared by daybreak. I myself shall have to stay here while my engineers make good some of the damage you have done."

"Am I to understand that I am to be allowed to go free?" Gaunt asked quietly.

"It amounts to that," the admiral answered.

"Thank God!" Lady Mildred cried fervently, and her face was aglow with joy.

"In my last wireless from the Admiralty, there was a message for you from Sir Keith Hamilton. 'Tell Gaunt that he may consider himself a lucky man, and suggest that he take a twelvemonth voyage round the world, for the benefit of his health.' In my opinion the advice is good."

There was a knock at the door and Captain Armstrong entered.

"The Governor-General's launch is making for the flag-ship, sir, and I think his Excellency is on board."

"Then I am afraid he will have to wait a while. I don't know that I am particularly anxious to see him till you are safely out of the way. Perhaps Lady Mildred would give me some tea?" the admiral said with a deferential bow.

Like the majority of sailors, the admiral had an eye for a pretty woman, and Lady Mildred smiled graciously, for she was very grateful for the mercy that was being shown to her husband.

She looked at Gaunt and read consent in his eyes.

"Perhaps Captain Armstrong will join us," she said demurely.

It was dusk when the admiral left and an hour later a launch left the *Esmeralda* for the *Heron*. Gaunt was carefully covered with blankets, and stood the journey well.

Captain Armstrong had accompanied them and shook hands with his companions in adventure.

"Good-bye, Gaunt. I hope that you will be quite fit when we meet again. Good-bye, Padre," and he gripped their hands tightly.

And when morning came the *Esmeralda* and the *Heron* had vanished from the mouth of the Congo.

## CHAPTER XLIII

**I**N the distance could be seen the Peak of Teneriffe, gleaming white among the clouds, and the *Heron* was steaming steadily towards the island.

Aft of the yacht John Gaunt lay on a deck chair with his wife sitting close to him. Her hand rested in his, and there was peace and contentment on her face. Already the millionaire was better, and there was a little color on his cheeks, but there was a moody expression in his eyes.

"I am very happy, dearest," Lady Mildred whispered.

But he did not answer, and she looked at him in wonder.

"Something is troubling you — what is it?"

"It is only that I have decided to go back to England when all the time I am longing to continue this voyage forever."

"Why do you wish to return to England? Remember Sir Keith's advice."

"I must go, Mildred. There is a warrant out for my arrest, and the more manly course is to go and face the music."

"But they may imprison you," she cried vehemently.

"I must risk that, dear one. You wouldn't have me play the coward."

"No. I can only wish you to do what you believe to be your duty, John."

"I thought you would say that. Call the captain to me."

Gaunt's eyes followed his wife with simple adoration.

"Captain, we sail straight for Southampton at full speed."

Edward Drake had drawn near, and he uttered a cry.

"I had been hoping that you would decide to do that," he said joyfully.

These last few days he had been struggling for the courage to give to Lady Ethel his brother's last message, but he had dreaded to see her suffer. Now he could no longer postpone the unpleasant duty, and so he went to the saloon where he found her reading, and she looked up with a smile when he entered.

"Lady Ethel, there is something that I have been trying to tell you," he began in a low voice.

The color came to her cheeks, and she could not look at him.

"Lindsay sent you a message. You know that he loved you as man rarely loves woman. He asked me to tell you that he would have died happy if he could only have known that you cared for him."

Tears dimmed her eyes, but still she did not look at him.

"He was a man worthy of any woman's love, and I believe that you would have been happy with him. I often watched you together, and it seemed to me that you did love him. It is something that we can share one another's grief for his loss. If his life had been spared, we might have been brother and sister."

She turned her eyes to him and he gave a cry of amazement.



"Ethel," he cried hoarsely.

"Yes, I loved your brother as you love him — as a sister would love him, and, Edward, I have sorrowed for your sorrow. I have seen you suffering, and I could not speak."

"Ethel, is it true?"

"Yes," she whispered tremulously.

But the revulsion of feeling was too great and he stood before her, wonder, incredulity, and love in his eyes. In a moment his arms were around her, and he kissed her passionately, her hair — her eyes — her lips.

"My darling, do you love me?"

"Yes, Edward, for a very long time, but I did not always know it. I am glad you have told me, for now I can help to comfort you. I can share in your sorrow, for we have both lost a brother."

And they told one another those things that are music to lovers' ears. Suddenly Drake drew himself away.

"Do you realize that I am a poor man, and can offer you nothing?"

"Except love — and that is everything," she interrupted him gently.

Gaunt and his wife were unfeignedly glad to hear the news, and after dinner the two men had a long talk.

"Drake, I have been thinking about my future. Whatever happens in England, I have determined upon my course of action. I believe that the attempt to fulfil my vow has made me a better man. I seem to see things differently and I am going to try to live the rest of my days — It is difficult to explain, and I want

your help. We will use my wealth together. You shall carry on your work in the East End of London, and you shall have all the money you require. I intend to make a settlement on your marriage to Ethel. No, don't protest. I'm not thinking of you, but there may be others —— "

"You are very generous," Drake said with deep emotion.

He himself cared nothing for wealth, but it was pleasant to know that his wife would not be deprived of the luxuries to which she had been accustomed.

The voyage was an uneventful one and when Southampton was reached they proceeded straight to London.

It was not till late the next morning that the news of Gaunt's arrival became known, and when he drove to Bow Street Police Court, the streets were thronged with an enthusiastic crowd who gave him the reception that is generally accorded to a popular hero.

He surrendered himself to the police, and later in the day was brought before the magistrate.

The proceedings were over in a few minutes. Mr. Ruggles, K. C., rose and spoke a few sentences.

"My clients have instructed me to withdraw the case, and I do so without comment."

Sir Richard Tester then rose.

"I should like my client to have an opportunity of stating on oath what really occurred, and how Marillier was killed."

The magistrate agreed, and Gaunt went into the witness box. The story was soon told and when he was formally discharged, a cheer was raised in the court, and

it was with the utmost difficulty that he made his way back to the car. During the afternoon he found out that the case brought by the Amanti Company against Davis had collapsed from lack of evidence, and so that worry disappeared.

A week later Lady Ethel was quietly married to Edward Drake, and they started for the south of France, where Gaunt and his wife were to meet them in the yacht.

Sir Keith Hamilton was present at the wedding and dined that night at Gaunt House.

"You are a lucky man, Gaunt. You bring about an international revolution and escape without punishment. More than that, you become the idol of the great British public."

"I owe a great deal to you, and am very grateful," Gaunt answered earnestly.

"Then tell me one thing — what was your motive in taking up the cause of the natives of the Congo?" Sir Keith asked slowly.

Gaunt did not answer, but his eyes met his wife's and they exchanged a look of perfect understanding.

And Sir Keith wondered and still wonders.

THE END







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